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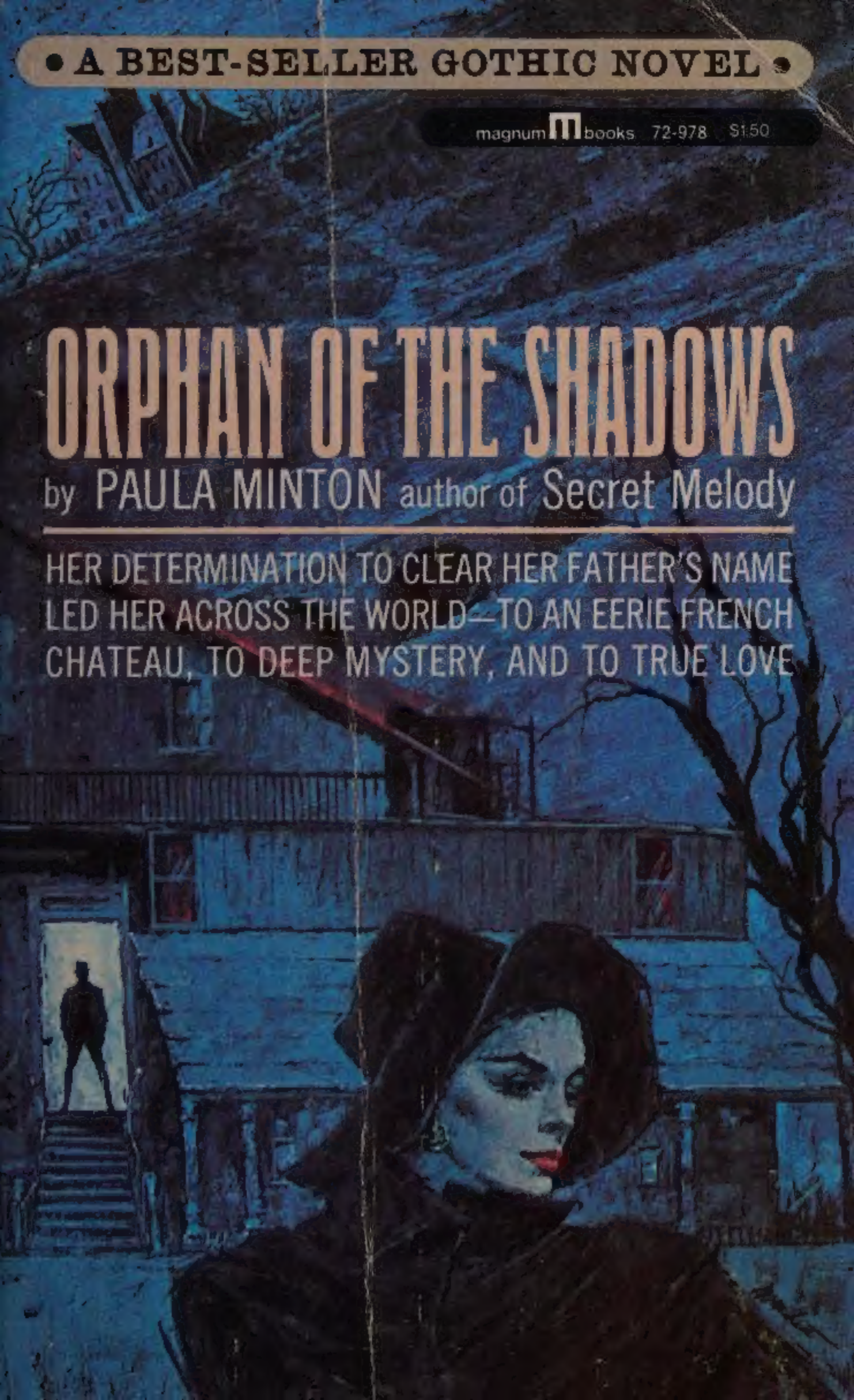
ORPHAN OF THE SHADOWS

by PAULA MINTON author of Secret Melody

HER DETERMINATION TO CLEAR HER FATHER'S NAME LED HER ACROSS THE WORLD—TO AN EERIE FRENCH CHATEAU, TO DEEP MYSTERY, AND TO TRUE LOVE



The Haunting Past

Did it really matter, when all was said and done? Wasn't it safer, surer, less disturbing to the tranquil life she led, to accept what had been said to her and to forget that which was disconcerting? Wasn't it enough that her father had been a genius, and that as his daughter she already showed a modest skill that would help her gain her livelihood and perhaps some measure of fame?

But the answers did not satisfy her, nor ease the anxiety she suddenly felt. Least of all could she understand why her uncle should, so many years after it had all happened, be so violently angry at her father or at anyone who spoke of him. And if Otto Miller, so obsessed by the past, had not forgotten, could not forget it, there must be reasons that he had never made known to her.

Until she knew them, her mind would not let her rest.

ORPHAN OF THE SHADOWS

Paula Minton

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"I wonder if a notion has yet seized you
To bury the keenest sword you ever saw
For twenty years in mud, and then go back
To find what may be left of it."

From: THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE by Edwin Arlington Robinson. 'Reprinted with permission of The Macmillan Company. Copyright 1924 by E. A. Robinson, renewed 1951 by Ruth Nivison.,

One

About thirty-seven miles northeast of West Frankfort, the main branch of the Mississippi slicing into Illinois narrows its often turbulent stream and becomes an irregular, wayward fork with an independent life of its own. Often when even the early spring floodtides make the mighty Mississippi a dread lash of violence that tumbles houses and uproots corn and wheat fields, this meandering fork is quiet, almost stagnant, as if time had halted its progress and metamorphosed its bed once again into the shallow gully near which the Algonquin braves once camped and cast their lines for the lurking catfish dissimulating themselves among the rocks and shadows at the bottom of the creek.

Another mile to the east it comes to an irresolute end in a jagged creek, whose eastern bank rises, high and forbiddingly barren, in bold relief against the northern and southern sides with their rows of thick flowering hedges and wild elm trees. The waters are dark with stagnation, perhaps four feet at the deepest point, and the dank, straggly tops of weeds peep near the edges of gravelly shores.

Within the radius of two miles nothing can be seen ex-

cept profuse vegetation, uncultivated land, dense clumps of trees and bushes and shrubs, with patches of marsh marigolds, swamp buttercups and mertensias dabbing yellow and blue tones amid the profusion of green. But two miles to the east, there rises the pitched roof of the Miller farmhouse, a curious admixture of quarry-hewn stones and of dark wood, with a narrow-railed balcony running beneath the windows of the second floor. In front of the house, at the right, stands a twisted oak tree, shattered by lightning a decade ago, broken and yet undaunted, like a symbol of man's defiance against the elements.

In winter, its black, grotesque shape holds but little snow, and its starkness against the thick white landscape becomes the more compelling. Its roots are thick and gnarled and old, and their tortuous knots spread for more than a yard all around it, often bared above the ground after a heavy rain. It is dead, and yet it lives.

The house itself is on the outskirts of Murganville, a prospering farm community of nearly seven thousand residents. Three-and-a-half miles to the southwest, the town itself emerges, occupying little more than three normal-size city blocks. In the center of town is a public square and small grassy park with benches circling an imposing bronze statue of the town's founder, Herman Murgan, a wealthy Dutch farmer who settled in this part of southern Illinois almost a century ago and who cultivated soybeans, barley, wheat and rye so expertly that he was able to induce the Illinois Central Railway to build a trunk line near the area so that the yield from his granary, and that of other farmers who followed him into Murganville, might be marketed. Having no surviving sons to carry on his name, Herman Murgan had only the name of the town and the statue which he had erected at his own expense to confirm and commemorate his existence. Those, and the house marked by the lightning-shattered oak which he and his farm hands built and in

which Otto Miller, present mayor of Murganville, now resides with his wife Greta and his young niece Alice.

Herman Murgan's old house was sturdily built indeed, though twenty years ago it had stood untenanted for more than a decade. It was about that time that Otto Miller, then in his mid-thirties, and Greta, a buxom, pink-skinned young woman at least eight years his junior whose quiet demeanor and large, haunted-looking blue eyes and thick flaxen hair had at once stirred the interest of the callow farm youths of the area, settled down in the town. Otto Miller went to work in the granary and for Carl Jesperson's supply store, and so industrious was he that within five years he had bought out old Jesperson. Five years after that, he purchased the old Murgan house and renovated the interior, putting in smart contemporary furniture and a kitchen full of modern appliances. Little Alice had come with him and Greta, and at first it was thought that she was the Millers' own child. But Otto Miller had explained that Alice was the daughter of his brother Heinrich, who had died in Germany during the war. And the people of Murganville came to admire the quiet, hard-working farmer who was bringing up his dead brother's child as his own. He and his wife Greta, he explained, had been art dealers in Berlin when Hitler launched his insane war against the bastions of peace-loving Europe, and it was only by a miracle that they had survived and managed to come to the United States, via Lisbon and South America, during the madman of Munich's last days in the bunker where he and Eva Braun took their own lives. Otto Miller had assured the townspeople of Murganville that he had satisfied the immigration authorities that he was not a Nazi, and he had been able to transfer enough of his money to a Swiss bank to guarantee that he would not become a public charge once arrived in this country.

His candor, the excellence of his English and his own

diligence were further qualities in his favor. The population of Murganville, moreover, consisted mainly of thrifty Dutch and German farmers who could, better than the average American, understand the desperate plight of an honest German caught up in the maniacal web of hatred and brutality that Hitler had spawned. The consensus was that not every man could be a martyr against impossible odds, and that every man had a right to make a new life in a new community. If the immigration authorities had cleared Otto Miller, the people of Murganville did not need to ask questions about his past. And, just six years ago, as a reward for his hard work and thrift and his singular achievement of having instituted a local farm cooperative that brought his neighbors better prices for their wheat and corn and soybeans and barley and rye, they overwhelmingly elected him mayor of the town. And two years ago they reelected him.

Finally, old Andreas Hoffmeier had vouched for him when Otto Miller first appeared in Murganville. And with good reason, too, for Greta, Otto's young bride, was a distant relative of Mathilda Hoffmeier. Old Andreas had been mayor at the time of Otto's arrival, and his wife Mathilda had been dead for nearly two years, so the old man had been eager to welcome this beautiful young kinswoman and her personable husband. Otto had married Greta when she was only sixteen, but she had been more than a helpmate to him in the flourishing art business they had tried to maintain despite the war.

It was a pity, old Andreas had thought, that the Millers had no other child than Alice. Murganville was an ideal community in which to bring up children, and the thriving farmers of the area generally had large families. There was a rural school for the youngsters, and even a small high school, whose brown brick building was one of the newest edifices in the peaceful old town. It seemed that Greta could have no children, and while

Otto himself said nothing on the subject, his kinsman by marriage sensed that every man must certainly yearn for a son to carry on his name and works. Andreas himself had had two strapping sons, but they were killed on Normandy Beach on D-Day, and a month later Mathilda died of a heart attack—from grief, it was said.

Yet Alice Miller was cared for as tenderly and thoughtfully as if she had been Otto's and Greta's own child. A shy, reticent little girl, her oval face with its highset cheekbones rarely lighted by a smile, she seemed from the first to live in a world of her own. Even in grammar school old Mrs. Henrietta Davies, who taught nearly all the classes (with the help of a younger substitute to whom Mrs. Davies assigned a good deal of the grading of papers), was struck by Alice's preoccupation with books and arts and crafts. The child loved to draw with crayons, and, later, to cut out ingenious paper designs and toys. And then in high school, as a freshman, she discovered ceramics through Miss Joanne Bruce, a gifted potter whose creations had been exhibited at the Art Institute and in the East. It was Miss Bruce, who had resigned from her job in a Chicago public school to come to live in Murganville with an older sister and who conducted a beginner's class in the working with clay and formative designs, who recognized in Alice a feeling for the medium.

And it was Miss Bruce who had got her a scholarship at Centralia College, where Alice had spent the past two years, returning each summer to the old house to work at her own kiln, at her own potter's wheel. Otto Miller, everyone said, had been wonderfully generous to his young niece. Imagine taking an old barn and converting it into an art studio! Not only that, but fitting it out with an electric kiln and providing glaze-spraying equipment, which was very expensive. All this to humor a young girl's whims, when it would be better if she got

married to one of the young farmers and settled down and bore children. At twenty, Alice Miller ought to have been married and had her first child, they said. It might have been one way of repaying her uncle, the mayor, for his kindness all these years, as it would be the only way he would ever have any sort of grandchild.

But Alice showed no inclination to marry, nor did she seem interested in even the handsome and most eligible males of the community, like Rickie Glogau, the good-natured sturdy blond son of Hans Glogau, who ran the only grocery store in town. Besides, she was away at college most of the time, and the neighbors saw her only during the summer; and then only on rare occasions, when she drove her uncle's old Ford into town to buy groceries or some sewing things for her aunt. She was always pleasant, but she never had anything to say, and she never lingered at the store to gossip with any of the women who would come up to her and introduce themselves and urge her to give her uncle, their good mayor, their very best regards.

Yes, she was a strange one, they said. Always staying in that barn, or walking all that long way to the creek to dig with a shovel and then walk back, the bucket laden down with gray or black clay. Now what would anyone want with clay? A child could play with it, yes, but what would a grown young woman do with it? And since Alice never spoke of her ceramics, the neighbors simply went on wondering.

Two

WHY, INDEED, would a grown young woman spend hours of a serene summer day digging in the bank of a placid creek for clay? Matt Harshaw had a theory or two that he undertook to share with a couple of cronies one afternoon in Phil's Place, Murganville's only tavern.

"Hell, you guys, she's scared of a man, that's what, so she's still playin' with dolls 'n stuff like that."

The wastrel son of Grover Harshaw, whose acreage was the largest of any farmer of Murganville, Matt was waiting impatiently for his aging father to die of the cancer that was slowly sapping away his strength; waiting for the moment he could collect his inheritance so he could immerse himself at length in the joys of the wine goblet and the scented beds of lust in some exciting metropolis far from the staid old town of his birth.

Before the admiring eyes of Pete Karkins and Andy Drunnan, whose fathers were poor and whose only taste of wealth came from their association with the Harshaw heir, Matt downed his whiskey and added with a knowing wink: "Hey, maybe she sculpts—you know, makes statues a guys outa that clay. Maybe that's how she gets her kicks. But you take it from me, guys, she's a real piece.

I saw her yesterday, down by that creek, when I was drivin' out to see Jennie Forse." At which last remark, his two friends lewdly guffawed, for blonde Jennie, youngest of four daughters of a widowed seamstress, proffered her overblown charms to anyone with the price.

Like all the other citizens of Murganville who knew nothing about arts and crafts, Matt Harshaw was flagrantly in error. How could he have known the wonders of the kiln, in which dull mud is miraculously transformed into pristine forms, glinting like rare jewels in the light? How could he have appreciated the fact that primitive man first turned to clay when the instinct to create, to form, to shape things other than for battle or hunting, imbued him with the sheer pleasure of achievement? How could he have divined that clay responds to and obeys the skillful touch, adapting itself to the yearning quest within the heart for that expression of thought and feeling which defy the pedestrian mechanics of insensate creatures, or that once the potter has completed the artistry of design and passed that humble clay through fire, it will forever after retain the guiding touch of the potter's fingers?

But even old Mrs. Davies, Alice Miller's first teacher, had had some intimation of this heaven-storming instinct to perpetuate a thought or a mood or a design; and though she dared not spend too much time with the precocious, quiet, intense child who saw things that the other children did not, she encouraged Alice to work with her fingers and to experiment and to think for herself in even the simplest craft work to which a rural elementary school was necessarily limited. Just as in high school, Miss Bruce, who had tasted professional acclaim in her own ceramic creativity, found in Alice a kindred spirit with a potential that promised far more than the safe destiny of a housewife and mother. And though Alice was now enrolled at a college in a course that would ultimately qualify her as a teacher, her summers were entirely devoted to those

long hours spent by the bank of the little creek and in the barn at her kiln and at her wheel. Nor was it any obstinacy or refusal to accept the world for what it was or her own placement in it; it lay deeper than that.

It lay in the knowledge that her dead father had been one of Europe's greatest ceramists and that his name was still revered by those who love what man can achieve out of that same humble clay from which, the philosophers would have us believe, we were once shaped by the Divine Potter and to which, in due course, all of us must come, however great our goals, however grandiose our schemes.

Common clay—yet precious enough to those who know and can extract its secrets. It can be thrown on a wheel, or rolled, pulled, cut and scraped, turned and touched. Fire hardens it, prepares it for the versatility of the gifted potter who adorns it with limitless designs, countless textures. Taken from its source, perhaps after a thousand centuries of formation by air and water in their unslackening erosion of granite, and then innumerable centuries again for winds and glaciers and torrential rivers to deposit it where we find it now, clay challenges the skill, the genius and the heart of those who work it.

But her knowledge of her father's remembered genius was tragically flawed. She had no recollection of anything except the old house which marked the boundary of Murganville. And in her earliest years, she had no reason to suspect that she was not the daughter of Otto and Greta Miller. It was not till she was ten, on the very evening of that birthday, that she learned she was their niece, not their own child. She had been so overjoyed with the lovely birthday cake Greta had baked her and the gifts of modeling clay and bright-colored crayons that she got up from the table and hugged Otto, saying, "It's the nicest birthday, Daddy! And thank you, Mommy, for the cake!" Whereupon the Millers exchanged a long look, and then

Greta uttered a choking sob and turned away. And when Alice asked him, "Why Mommy is crying on my birthday?" Otto Miller took her on his knee and told her.

She was born in Berlin on April 28, 1945, the day Mussolini and his mistress were executed by partisans. Her mother, whose name was Erna, died giving birth. Her father was Otto Miller's brother (the name had been Müller then—Otto changed it to the Americanized version of Miller when he came to Murganville). Her father later died by his own hand—though Otto Miller did not tell her that terrible fact until years later, when Alice discovered in the pages of an authoritative book on pottery the full-color illustrations of exquisite majolica dishes and candlesticks made by the great German ceramist Heinrich Müller, and she excitedly asked her uncle if this was not the work of her real father. And Otto Miller had said that it was, adding solemnly, "I wish to God in heaven I could remember my brother only as the artistic genius whose work you see reproduced in that book, *Liebchen.* But you are old enough now to know the truth. Your father, for all his great gifts, was a man greedy for fame and money. He became a National Socialist . . . a Nazi. Even I, who loved him, turned against him. But your mother's death must have made him see what he had done with his life, and so he killed himself, after begging me to take you and bring you up as my own child. And now you know also why I changed my name, so that no one here would ever guess that you or your aunt or I ever were related to him."

She had seen other pictures of her father's sensitive and original work in other books since then. And she came to believe that her own love for working with clay had been acquired through heritage of birth. Yet at the same time, she found it hard to reconcile the poetic and compassionate feelings of an artist who could conceive a bowl whose delicate graffito design had been scratched with a pen in

white engobe over red clay body—a piece that had won him first prize in a European pottery competition held in Delft in 1937—with those of a man who had embraced the chauvinistic bigotries and barbarous inhumanities for which the Nazi credo stood. How could they be one and the same person?

That was her brooding secret. She did not speak of it to Otto and Greta Miller. But as she matured from adolescence into young womanhood, she spent more and more time with her own ceramic endeavors, as if she were determined to realize from that one proud part of her heritage all that was possible, coupled with whatever talents she herself possessed. Those endeavors, in a way, were a kind of dedication for her, which went far beyond emotional ties or retrospect over her own still shadowy antecedents. Even the picture of her beautiful mother that her uncle had shown her did not enable her to conjure up a supposition of what might have happened if her mother and father had survived. They were both unreal, her mother most of all because her mother's life had ended when her own began.

And her father existed for her only in the breathtaking photographs of the creations he had fabricated on the potter's wheel or the casting molds. For what he had created withstood the judgment of the years, yet bore no relation to the personal life of the artist himself. She thought of his work as she thought of the music of Schubert or Scriabin, not of their reckless lives, their flaws which brought them physical death before their creative span could be truly fulfilled. That was the only way in which she could revere him; as an artist, not as a man.

Three

In the warm, late June sun, at the end of the little creek, as the crickets and bullfrogs chirped away to fill the air with life, Alice found it difficult to imagine those last days when chaos had seized the supposedly invincible Third Reich. There was no mental foothold for her, not even a spiritual fulcrum by which she could comprehend the emotions and the blind, stubborn acceptance by which a nation of reasonably sensible men and women had followed a megalomaniac to utter disaster. For while the townspeople of Murganville were mainly of German and Dutch extraction, theirs was a second, often a third generation of European outlook, mellowed by the freedom they had known in this prospering little Illinois town. Even in grammar school, she had heard little that concerned the war, at whose end she had been born. And in high school and in college, it had been relegated to the impassive print upon a history-book page, touching her not at all; the story of Hitler's rise to power read like a melodramatic pulp novel, something one read out of curiosity. There was nothing inflammatory there to stir her blood, to make her feel that in any way she held kinship to the tragedy of Germany.

And yet, since that night of her tenth birthday, when Uncle Otto had told her that she was his niece and not his own true flesh and blood, she had tried to understand what had happened across the Atlantic. The art books told her little about Heinrich Müller except that he had died in 1945—which her uncle had already confirmed—and that he had shown an amazing fecundity of expression in his free forms and his glazes. And Miss Bruce, one of her few lasting friends, who had followed her work even after she left high school to study at Centralia College, could tell her little more about the artistic genius whom her uncle had damned with the Nazi swastika and whose name was never mentioned in the old house.

Out of loyalty, she had wanted to defend her father; she had reasoned that a man whose sensitive, knowing fingers could shape clay into the imperishable beauty of a bowl or a candlestick or an urn that could speak across the years to the connoisseur of craftsmanship could not belong to the unthinking, inhuman hordes who had complacently accepted the extermination of millions of innocent men, women and children whose only crime had been the accident of not having been born "Aryan." But again, there was only sentiment to lead her to that conclusion, a wish-fulfillment which, as she had grown older, had intensified in her mind when logic told her that with every passing year the chance of clearing her father's name lessened.

But ultimately, what reason could she have to doubt her uncle? He and Aunt Greta had been as kind to her as if she had actually been their daughter. When Miss Bruce had visited the house just before her graduation from high school and talked to Uncle Otto about her ceramic skill, he had said, "Alice has great talents, and this little town will stifle her. If you honestly think she has capabilities in this work, Miss Bruce, tell me what she will need to do fine work, to do things by herself that will bring her ac-

knowledgment by a person like yourself, who is already a famous artist. I will see that she has whatever she needs. She is like my own daughter, and I would deny her nothing."

And Miss Bruce had explained to Uncle Otto about the equipment a good potter should have: an electric kiln with Globar elements which could reach temperatures up to cone 15 and thus be able to fire stoneware and porcelain, as well as replacement elements so there would be no delay in work when the original burned out; stilts for supporting glazed pieces in the kiln during the fire; glaze-spraying equipment, costly but providing the best results of all, with spray gun, compressor, and a spray booth; a first-rate wheel, of course, with jigger bat and template for making tableware; special tools for working in plaster; and finally, materials for glaze. And when he had asked, "If Alice has all these things, Miss Bruce, do you think she has the skill to use them well and to make a name for herself?" And Miss Bruce had looked at him a moment, then said, "The master potter would have all these things. Even I lack many of them, but in my opinion your niece has an understanding and a feeling for originating designs, and these things will free her from flaws and crudities and much of the mechanics and leave her able to realize her creative aims."

So he had bought them all for her, as a kind of graduation gift after high school, and Miss Bruce and Alice had spent that summer, the happiest Alice had ever known, experimenting and collaborating. Miss Bruce had made some of her own pots in Alice's new kiln, showing her how to glaze, both with slip—which is applied before the piece is fired—and with the sprayer after the piece was fired and ready. Alice learned the fascinating yet arduous procedure of working out her own clay body formula, based on four vital rules: it must have enough plasticity to be workable; it must be porous enough so

that its shrinkage can be controlled; it must reach density at practicable temperatures managed by the kiln; and if the ware is to be cast, it must be capable of deflocculation. And Miss Bruce provided Alice with a dramatic demonstration of that last rule: she took 1,000 grams of dry clay and mixed it with 400 grams of water to form a sticky mass; but then she added a few drops of sodium silicate as an electrolyte, and suddenly the mixture changed into a smooth, creamy liquid easy to pour and thus suitable for casting.

Alice learned, too, the importance of firing pottery. Miss Bruce taught her how to experiment with various types of clay, including some her teacher had bought in an art supply shop in Chicago. High temperatures melt away impurities and produce specks of color and strikingly unusual textures in clay, yet not all clays will stand high firing. Conversely, clays that will take higher temperatures yield surprisingly beautiful textures. Miss Bruce used some clay from the Illinois River near Monmouth; at low temperature, it turned into a sickly yellow, porous and unable to sustain glazes or to hold liquids. Yet fired from cone 04—1940 degrees Fahrenheit—to cone 9—2345 degrees Fahrenheit—it became hard, dense, burnished with a breathtaking silvery-gray hue. She learned to use a pyrometer with thermocouple to measure the temperature of her kiln; she found out that uneven heat causes warping, and that she must take ample time for her firing, just as she must never be in a hurry to take pieces out of the kiln till they were able to be lifted out with her bare hands. Once, eager to show Miss Bruce a dish with scroll design which she herself had worked out, she reached into the kiln with asbestos gloves and snatched it out to show her teacher, only to have it fall apart in her hands.

Thus she learned the flaws in the clay and the exciting challenge of working them out, of eliminating them,

sometimes even utilizing them for effect. There was no more exhilarating feeling than to remove from the kiln a cup, or a vase or a bowl whose design and decor she herself had worked out, felt and thought out without help from anyone, and to see that it was good, that its form and texture and glaze suited the eye, the hand, the heart.

Here, just above the shallow pool of brackish water that brought the creek to an end, was the best place to dig for the rich clay that fired so well, lent itself to so many intriguing designs and patterns, took vari-colored glazes so beautifully. Miss Bruce had told her that one batch of clay, even from the same source, might well differ from another, and that one must test constantly. There were so many things to watch for, such as shrinkage: clay shrinks as it dries, and it shrinks again when it is fired, and every type of clay has a different kind of shrinkage, so that it is not unusual for the final piece taken out of the kiln to be a fifth shorter than its original clay shape.

Yet in the two summers that she had come back to Murganville, the whole face of the towering bank, from the water's edge almost to the top, had given her a magnificent lode of porous, pliable clay, clay that took fire and glaze and gave her back the joy of finalized patterns and designs exactly as she had conceived them.

And now Miss Bruce was going to join her later that afternoon to work out an idea for a Japanese-type vase. She had lent Alice her copy of the breathtakingly beautiful "Katachi," one of the magnificent Abrams art books, and they had marveled at the fascinatingly grotesque Onigawara, "demon tiles," made from clay and used on roofs to drive away the evil spirits. The face of the demon might, Alice thought, be realized on the surface of a vase or water jug, with a bright vermilion red glaze formed out of white lead, clay, flint and chromium oxide, in specific proportions which had to be worked out in advance. The ingredients for a glaze had to be weighed

out dry, then mixed with water, about half a cupful for a 300-gram batch. It was amazing how much practical and mathematical knowledge one had to have, just as in the other crafts like weaving, where more time was sometimes spent on paperwork and the design than in the actual throwing of the shuttles.

She had been back two weeks now since the close of the spring term at Centralia, and the warm sun and air had tanned her skin till she looked like an Indian. Outdoors, with no one around to disturb her, she had the feeling of communing within herself; and here in the sunlight with the green beauty of trees and shrubs on every side, the shadows of the mind could be driven out, banished by the wholesome sensuality of physical exertion. She thrust her shovel into the wet ground and forced it down with the toe of her sturdy, comfortable, low-heeled work shoe. Even the gurgling, sucking sound of the metal prying into mud seemed to blend with the chirping of the birds and the soft croaks of the bullfrogs farther down the creek. All this was real and bore no saddening nuances from the past.

She wore a potter's smock over her thin blue cotton dress and short woolen socks—there was no point in wearing good hose. Her slim, sinuous, bare calves were tanned, too, and the sun felt warm on the back of her neck as she dug quickly, deftly piling the mud to one side till the visible strata of clay appeared. Then her serious face brightened with a little smile to see that this new lode of clay was, at least to the sight, as rich in color and as workably plastic as the last batch she had found the other day. Once having dug it up and loaded it into the bucket, she knew it couldn't be used at once. Natural clay always needed cleaning, and it had to be spread out to dry on wooden boards in the bright sun. After it was completely dry, you broke up the large lumps with a mallet, and then you could make the clay into slip by sifting it in a pail

of water and letting it slake for a few hours. Here again you had to remember one of the many practical rules of preparation: use twice as much water as clay so that the slip becomes liquid and thus easier to screen. And then, after stirring it, you would screen it through a 40-mesh sieve, letting it settle for a time, then pouring off the excess water. Finally, your remaining clay slip could be poured into plaster drying bats where it would harden to the right consistency for wedging.

She did not shirk these details. By following them, by taking clay and subjecting it to practical rules of use learned ages ago by greater artists than she knew herself capable of being, she could understand artistic honesty the better.

Because, when the clay was ready and when every flaw had been removed, the rest was up to her own skill, her own intrinsic concepts of design and form, the sensitivity of her own fingers on the potter's wheel or on the plaster molds. Then what emerged would be truly hers, and its flaws would be in her own faulty concept, not the clay.

At times, Alice felt a certain impatience with herself, a desire to make greater progress. She still wasn't satisfied with her work. Oh, Miss Bruce had been very flattering about her pieces from last summer—that teacup with blue glaze in metallic sheen, that salad bowl in its rich orange hue and the sleek smoothness of its texture. But she was still experimenting, still not certain. Perhaps the free form was best, one which followed no other known design or pattern. For while it freed the designer from restrictions laid down for conventional pieces, it demanded greater originality and imagination. Its freedom, then, should be that of the rocks, the trees, the shrubs, substances which adapted themselves to and were adapted by the elements that surrounded them.

Yes, as a great poet had once said, there were sermons even in stones. This rock near the edge of the water,

jagged, in the shape of an adze. It suggested prehistoric man and his fashioning a crude weapon that would defend him and his family against the predatory beasts. Yet, turning it and looking at it from another angle, it became a wizened face of an old man. This flat pebble here might be a coin, or the lid of a tiny jar. Nature eternally ramified and varied her wonders, and each person who beheld them saw them in a different way. To keep an open, inquisitive mind, to perceive and understand those innumerable shades of divergence—that was her philosophy.

It might, she sometimes thought, guide her to a less troubled appreciation of her father; not as an artist, for she already knew that he was among the great ones; but as a man, as a human being who, if he had been such a creator of beautiful things, must surely have had a conscience and a creed.

Or had he, like Faust who sold his soul to Mephistopheles, dispensed with them to attain his greatness, so that the crimes against mankind which the Nazis had committed touched him in no way and let him be, if not a participant, an unconcerned accomplice by the sheer dint of accepting them without protest?

Four

She had nearly filled the bucket, and all the signs indicated an inexhaustible supply of this excellent porous clay. She would carry it to the deserted shed and dry it there, come back for more. It was so lovely outdoors, she almost hated to spend time in the studio-barn. But Miss Bruce would want to mix some glazes when she came. Perhaps she could induce her to stay for supper. She knew Aunt Greta and Uncle Otto wouldn't mind. She so rarely brought anyone home with her. There were times when she wished she had more friends. At Centralia, she had two or three girl friends, including her roommate, Peggy Stewart, a vivacious brunette six months older than she was, and a senior. But Peggy liked boys and was forever going out on dates, and her weekends were spent at home in Monmouth, where she had "an understanding" with a tall, lanky young farm agent whom she would probably marry. And the other girls lived in Centralia and never went anywhere, being the studious type.

As for boys, she hadn't really given them much thought. There was no one here in Murganville to whom she was in the least attracted. No, not even Rickie Glogau, about whom even Aunt Greta talked as being "a real

catch." Yes, Aunt Greta had, from time to time, hinted that she ought to meet a nice young man and not be so serious all the time. She knew that even in high school, some of the other girls had been catty about her not having a boy friend. But she hadn't minded. Ever since Miss Bruce had taken a personal interest in her and let her spend an occasional weekend using Miss Bruce's own studio kiln making her very own first pieces of pottery, she had felt that all her pent-up emotions and hopes could be best expressed through this exacting creative medium. Clay didn't ask who you were, or what your background was; it followed the touch of your fingers, lent itself to the colors you applied to it; and when you took it out of the kiln and saw it as a bowl or a jug or a cup or a plate, you knew it was your own skill that had given the humble clay a new form and substance.

But with people, you had to explain all about yourself, and they were forever prying to learn all they could about you. They'd want you to tell them all about your father and mother, and they'd think you odd if you didn't. Of course, she could have told casual acquaintances that her father and mother were dead and that her father had been a great ceramist, and said no more than that. But with someone with whom you were emotionally involved, someone with whom you could communicate about the arts and what was going on in the world, you couldn't dismiss your past with a simple statement like that. You'd want to know about their background, too, because it would tell you how much there was to share between you in upbringing and outlook and moral judgments and all the things that really mattered in a personal relationship.

And if she were to meet someone for whom she cared a great deal—not that she was likely to in Murganville—how could she but not brood about her father's defection from humanity? If she had inherited his appreciation for pottery—and Miss Bruce had assured her that she had—

might she not also have acquired the moral taint that had corrupted him, that same indifference to the sufferings of men?

She had never told her aunt and uncle of this secret fear. She had brushed off Aunt Greta's sly matrimonial hints by laughingly remarking that nobody would want a girl who was studying to be a school teacher and who locked herself up in a barn all day to make pots and dishes out of clay.

Perhaps she had been wrong in not asking Uncle Otto to tell her all he knew about her father. Perhaps it could have been brought out into the open, detail by detail, so that she could have digested it then and there. At least then she would not have had these years of gnawing uncertainty, of tortured doubts, of moments when she would look at a photograph of one of Heinrich Müller's superb pottery pieces and ask herself, "Was this the same man who joined the Nazis and knew about the concentration camps and the mass murders and didn't even try to get out of a country that had gone insane?"

And now, of course, it was all behind her. In another two years, she would have her degree and could teach anywhere in the state. It would be as far from Murganville as she could manage, she knew, so that she could start life on her own terms. And she was grateful for the ceramic skill she had acquired, even if that gratitude was owed to a dead man who had been both a genius and a criminal, the latter implicit if only by his having paid lip service to the degrading doctrines of the Nazis. Her name was Alice Miller, and her life would be an open book with nothing to hide or to deny. And even if she never achieved the artistic fame that her father had, whatever she did would be hers, without debt to the past. Yes, and with thanks to the generosity of her uncle who had given her the finest tools of her craft. In all things except the fact of actual

generation, he had been her true father. It was this she must remember in the years ahead. . . .

The shack where Alice collected and dried her clay was about two hundred yards to the west of the bank where she was digging. Her studio-barn was perhaps the same distance from the house. Her uncle had built a much larger barn to the south of the house some twelve years ago, where the three cows that furnished milk, butter and cheese for the family were quartered, as well as his old car and the tractor.

Since the door of the shack was to the west, it could be left open in late afternoon for the sun to pour down on the lumps of clay arranged on the rectangular boards. In the morning, if she was digging for clay, Alice left the boards outside the shack so the clay would be thoroughly dried by the end of the day. She paused now, mopped her perspiring forehead with a handkerchief from the pocket of her smock. There. That should be enough for today. Miss Bruce would be at the studio-barn waiting for her in about half an hour, just time enough to spread this new clay out on the boards and leave it to dry. Then, drying the bucket with rags she had left in the shack, she would bring back the clay that had already dried.

She straightened with a sigh of relief, then thrust the shovel deep into the earth, leaving it there to mark the new lode. Perhaps Miss Bruce would want some of this clay, which was the best she had found yet; its firing properties were really outstanding, it held a glaze beautifully, and its shrinkage was readily calculable. A potter couldn't ask for more.

She looked up at the cloudless blue sky, smiling. At twenty, she still retained the enigmatic charm she had had as a child: the pure oval face with its firm chin, the high-planed forehead, the delicately winged Grecian nose, the sensitive mouth with its fuller lower lip, the highset

cheekbones, the thin dark brown brows over thick-lashed, widely spaced dark brown eyes. Her hair was bobbed short, leaving the forehead bare, the soft curls just touching the delicate archway of the neck. She was slim, of slightly more than medium height, supple and quick of movement. To the passerby, she had none of the blatant standards by which female beauty is so often judged. But to the connoisseur who could savor the planes and shadows of her face, the elegance of her figure, the sensitivity and emotional latency expressed in eyes and mouth and the quivering mobility of her nostrils, she had a beauty that was at once aristocratic and inscrutable.

She took up the handle of the bucket and climbed up the gently sloping bank to the west and towards the shack, finding ready footholds along the sun-glinting rocks. There was a natural gracefulness in her walk, even in the stress of climbing. She walked quickly towards the shack, eager to get back to the kiln, to discuss with Miss Bruce some ideas for new glazes that had occurred to her.

Strange—the door was closed. She hadn't remembered closing it when she'd come out after lunch. Perhaps the wind—no, that couldn't be. There'd been almost no wind at all all day.

She set the bucket down near the door and put her hand to the knob. All at once the door swung back, and the grinning face of Matt Harshaw leered at her. He was tall, towheaded, and at 25 already displayed signs of indolent living. Too much liquor and rich food had thickened his neck and face and given him the telltale bulge of what would be a paunch a decade later.

"Hiya there, Alice honey," he drawled, taking a toothpick out of the pocket of his jeans and, chomping on the edge, letting it stick out of the corner of his fleshy mouth. His pale blue eyes squinted at her bare legs, and the toothpick swung over to the other corner of his mouth in tacit approval of what he saw.

"I didn't see you come."

He chuckled, folding his arms, leaning against the edge of the door, insolently casual, sure of himself and his maleness. "Nope, guess you didn't. You were too busy diggin' down there. What's the bucket full of, huh, mud for pies?"

She eyed him coolly. "I suppose it could be. And pies fit for people like you."

"Why, you uppity little—!" He checked himself. "Just 'cause you're the mayor's niece don't give you no call to look down your nose at me."

"I'm not doing that at all. I was just surprised to find you here. I didn't think you took any interest in pottery and things like that."

"Well, I don't as a rule, till it stuck in my craw how you bypass everybody in town when you get back from college every summer. Think you're better'n anybody else in Murganville, I s'pose?"

"Of course I don't. But nobody in town really cares about my pottery, except my aunt and uncle, so I don't care to bother them."

"That's what I mean—even when you weasel your way out, all you're sayin's that you still got a high opinion'a yerself, Alice. Now a cute gal like you oughta be more sociable. Nobody's ever seen you with a fella. S'matter, don'tcha like guys none?"

"I really hadn't given the matter much thought, Mr. Harshaw. Now if you'll let me get into that shack, I want to take my clay home."

He sniggered, shifted the toothpick again and made no move to get out of the doorway. His thumbs were thrust into the belt-loops of his jeans. "I betcha if a guy was to kiss ya, Alice, you'd fall in a dead faint. 'N I betcha you never been kissed, neither."

"It's hardly any of your business who kisses me, Mr.

Harshaw. And from what I've heard, you're much more likely to prefer Jennie Forse's kisses to mine."

He burst out laughing. "Now you got no call rightly to say a thing like that, 'less'n you find out just what I do prefer, Alice honey. You heard talk about Jennie'n me, huh?"

"I'm afraid so. Even my uncle knows how you carry on. I myself haven't the least concern about what you do, Mr. Harshaw. I'm not a judge of people's behavior."

He stepped from the still, his eyes appraisingly narrowed, the flicker of sensual interest glowing in their pale blue depths. "Now all them big fancy words you learned at college, Alice, if I unnerstan' them right, mean to say you wouldn't care a darn what I did, huh?"

"I think I made that clear."

"Sure. Real clear. But like I was jist sayin', you got no call to say I'd rather have Jennie Forse kiss me till you find out what I think 'a kissin' you. Let's us find out how we both like it, huh, baby?"

He seized her by the shoulders, laughing huskily, and mashed his mouth on hers. Alice stood passively, submitting to it, her eyes open, her face calm, quelling the surge of nausea that leaped in her at the smell of his whiskeyed breath, the hot wet looseness of his mouth.

"Well, how was that?" he demanded with a triumphant snigger.

"Rather distasteful, if you must know. And if you've finished your experiment, I'd like to get my clay and go back to the house."

"You're a cool piece, you are. Only I bet if you weren't the mayor's kin, you'd quit actin' so high'n mighty, Alice Miller. I bet you wish you were like Jennie Forse, so you could ask me what you're really wantin'—to take you inta that shack and make a woman outa—"

Alice cut him short. Seizing the bucket with both hands, she hurled its sticky, oozing contents full into his face. He

stumbled back, losing his balance and sprawled backwards into the shack with a cry of pain.

"If I were like Jennie Forse," she said vibrantly, her cheeks reddening with mingled anger and shame, "I'd still choose my company. And that would certainly exclude you, Mr. Harshaw. I didn't mean to soil your shirt. If you'll send my uncle a bill for the cleaning, I'll take care of it myself. And now, if you don't mind, I'm going back to the house. You're welcome to make mud pies of the clay if you like. I think I've enough back at the studio."

She turned and walked away. Matt Harshaw rubbed the back of his head. His eyes blazed with hatred. "You little bitch," he snarled. "Ya gonna be sorry you did that."

But by then her slim figure was out of hearing range.

Five

Miss Joanne Bruce was standing in front of the studio-barn waiting for Alice, her mild blue eyes aglow with excitement. She was in her mid-sixties, tall and wiry, and her angular features were as bronzed by the sun as Alice's. Not even her closely cropped white hair could dissemble the fact that she still retained the energy and intellectual zest she had possessed at the outset of her teacher's career more than forty years ago. Indeed, it had been that intensity and vibrancy which had so impressed Alice back in high school and inspired her to devote all her free time to the study of ceramics.

"It's good to see you, Miss Bruce," Alice smiled. "How's your sister today?"

Miss Bruce sniffed with undisguised acerbity. "Poorly, thank you—by her accounts. Just between us, my dear, I strongly suspect that if Amy were in the army, her top sergeant would call her a goldbricker."

Alice stifled a sympathetic giggle. Amy Bruce, six years older than her sister, had been a teacher also, but there the resemblance ended. Sturdily built, even buxom, endowed with a prodigious appetite for her age and

healthy as the proverbial horse, Amy Bruce was nevertheless convinced that she suffered from virtually every symptom in the *Jones Home Medical Almanac*. Joanne Bruce had little patience with her, though she loved her dearly, and her customary reply to Amy's anguished recital of her imaginary ailments was, "If you'd follow my diet, Amy, you wouldn't mistake plain and ordinary gas on the stomach for jaundice."

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting, Miss Bruce," Alice apologized.

"Not at all, dear. I just got here, as a matter of fact. I parked that battered old Nash of mine round the other side of the barn. You were out digging for clay, I imagine."

Alice flushed, remembering Matt Harshaw's interruption. "I—er—yes, I was. But I decided to leave it in the shack to dry some more."

"That's a good idea. Besides, I think you have enough on hand. But you'll want the very finest grade you can get, and a good deal of it, too, once you've heard my news."

"Oh?"

The white-haired teacher took out a letter from her purse as Alice unlocked the barn door with the key she kept fixed to a simple gold chain about her slim neck. "Yes, I've some real news for you today, Alice."

Alice turned on the light switch. The old barn had been given a fresh coat of white paint, and inside it was roomy and immaculately clean. The windows had been sealed shut to keep the temperature of the kiln as constant as possible, and Uncle Otto had put in an old couch, a rocker and a worn but still serviceable armchair for his niece's comfort. Miss Bruce promptly parked herself in the rocker and handed Alice the letter, explaining, "It's from Henry Meyers, an old friend of mine who was a member of the old Midwest Designer-Craftsmen group

and who did very fine ceramics in his day. He's given it up, but he still keeps abreast of the news in the field."

"I see." Alice quickly read the letter, then looked up, wide-eyed. "But that's marvellous, Miss Bruce! Only I don't see how—"

"Stuff and nonsense, Alice! Of course you'll enter. They don't often have prizes like that for pottery, you know. And you're going to win the first, or my name isn't Joanne Bruce!" Her homely face was animated, the way Alice remembered it from their first meeting in her freshman class at high school.

"But every ceramist in the country will be submitting things, Miss Bruce, and I'm not that good, really."

"Don't be so all-fired humble, girl! Haven't I taught you myself, and didn't I win a few prizes in my day? Besides, you've inherited a good deal of your father's genius, if I'm any judge. He would have been proud to see your work, believe me, Alice."

Alice lowered her eyes and was silent. She thought of the night she had brought home the book Miss Bruce had lent her and shown the illustrations to her uncle, and he had told her that they had been the work of her true father. Subsequently, she had decided to tell her kindly teacher only that her father had died during the war. And Miss Bruce had never pried to learn more than Alice had told her. There was really no reason now to broaden the communal knowledge the two of them shared. She was sure that Miss Bruce would, just as she had, ultimately judge Heinrich Müller by his skill and not by his failure as a man. Just as some music critics had observed that although Gieseking, the world's greatest interpreter of Debussy's piano music, had had Nazi sympathies, people hearing his recordings today remembered him only for the exquisite communication of that impressionistic music; so she and Miss Bruce had to cast out emotional judgments and reckon only with the artis-

tistic attainment. How many times she had held to this precept when her heart was heavy with grief over the gulf of time and the wedge of conscience that separated her from her father!

"Now it's all very well to be modest—and you can take it from me that not many modern girls are, Alice—," Miss Bruce went on, undeterred by this lack of enthusiasm in her most promising pupil, "but facts are facts, and I want you to enter that contest. You've plenty of time to make all the pieces—a month would be ample time and some to spare. And since the deadline is the first of August and the judges' decision will be made two weeks later, you could have that European trip under your belt before you started college in late September, you know you could." The white-haired teacher's indomitable enthusiasm carried away all hesitation, like a mountain freshet that sweeps debris before it. Alice had to smile at Miss Bruce's use of colloquial expressions, such as "Under your belt," which demonstrated her teacher's determination to keep up with the times.

"Yes, I dare say I could. But do you really think I'd have a chance?"

"Now, Alice Miller, stop fishing! That's for little girls who haven't done their lessons who try to weasel out of a scolding. You're a mature young woman, you've been working with clay ever since you were fourteen, and your last few pieces show a real depth of concept and an originality that's superior to my own."

"Oh, now you're flattering me too much, Miss Bruce," Alice protested, her cheeks coloring with pleasure at this decisive praise.

"I'd be the first to tell you if you didn't have the stuff, my dear. But you do have, and this is a God-given chance to take advantage of it. You read Henry Meyers' letter. What did it say?"

Alice smiled and dutifully fulfilled her role as the stu-

dent being called upon to answer her teacher's question. "That the Ceramics Department of the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art is sponsoring a nationwide contest for potters, with a first prize of two thousand dollars, which must be spent on a trip to Europe to visit accredited art centers, the winning pieces to be on display at the museum for three months after the judges' decision."

"All right then. What happened is that John Dudley, the great man of American pottery, saw a chance to make an income-tax deduction by putting up that prize through the museum, where he's head curator, as you know, and he knows also he'll get a lot of writeups in the national press for his benevolence. And only those American artists who have never before won first prize in any kind of national competition are eligible to enter. You see, he's obviously looking to develop unknown talent, and he'll get some reflected credit. Well, Alice Miller, you qualify in every respect. And you can do the work."

"It says the entrant must submit a set of functional pieces which combine the finest craftsmanship with free expression."

"That's just jargon. What old Dudley means is that he doesn't want some slick vase that everybody's made for the last hundred years, the kind of stuff they turn out in mass assembly. Now, you know what I'd work out for that contest, my dear?"

"What, Miss Bruce?"

"They want functional pieces, something for practical use, yet not commercial. I'd make a coffee service, Alice. With tray, creamer and sugar bowl with its decorative top."

"Yes, that would be good. Maybe in white, with black trim."

"Perfect! The simplicity and purity of your lines and

shapes would be emphasized with those two basics, my dear."

"I think the tray ought to be made with a mold, but I could do the others on the wheel."

"Indeed you could. And the clay you've been bringing to the studio, from that place in the creek, is just right for the work, Alice. Very porous and workable, and it takes glazes so well, you know. Then you'll enter?"

"You—you're sure I should?"

"*Will* you stop fishing? You know perfectly well you can win it if you try hard enough. And you'd have done it on your own, Alice. Even your father, if he were alive today, couldn't take that from you. How very proud he'd have been to see you win—I like to think our predecessors look down from somewhere and watch what we're doing to improve on the ideas they gave us. Maybe it's silly, but it's a thought that's always helped me do my best, so that I won't be content with the past. And now let's get to work. This time, we won't work on glazes. We'll start to think out the design you're going to choose for your coffee service."

Miss Bruce's words echoed strangely in Alice's mind . . . *our predecessors look down from somewhere and watch what we're doing to improve on the ideas they gave us.* Could it be true that the spirit of Heinrich Müller was still extant, hovering over her? Or had she, by thinking of him only as a mortal artist, banished that spirit from her for good?

Six

"You'll stay to dinner, won't you, Miss Bruce?"

"You know how Amy will fuss and fret," the teacher smiled.

"But just this once? We've so much to talk over—whether I'll use the wheel or molds to cast my forms. And the design. And whether I ought to paint any final motif on the finished pieces. Please, Miss Bruce—you see I need your help."

"Well—all right. I guess for once Amy will just have to put up with dinner by herself and our cook Susan. Ah, she's a treasure. You know," Miss Bruce added slyly, "the marvel is, I can eat as much as my sister and never put on a pound. I tell Amy it's nervous energy and having a hobby. I'm afraid my poor sister's hobby is thinking up new ailments for herself."

"But at her age—"

"Stuff and nonsense, girl," Joanne Bruce insisted. "Old Doctor Pearson examined Amy last week and just between us, he told me that it's all in her mind. Her heart's sound as a gold-standard dollar—the more's the pity we ever went off it—and all that's really wrong is that she's

downright lazy. Now if she'd taught crafts as I had, she'd be used to moving about. But, no, history was her subject, and you know how sedentary that can be."

Alice found herself laughing wholeheartedly; the gesticulations and facial grimaces that accompanied this explanation of Amy's failings made good pantomime. Yet there was no malice in it; Joanne Bruce had a deep affection for her sister, and a concern for Amy's health, imaginary ills notwithstanding.

She locked the door of the studio-barn, and Miss Bruce put a hand on her slim suntanned shoulder. "It's good to hear you laugh, my dear. You ought to do more of it," she said gently. "You're too much to yourself—even at college, I dare say. That's why you must win this competition—a trip to Paris or Vienna or Rome would do you a world of good. Maybe you'd meet a nice young man, too. That wouldn't do any harm either."

"Why, Miss Bruce!" Alice exclaimed, her cheeks crimsoning.

"Well, it's true," the ceramics teacher stoutly insisted. "Now I'm not one to endorse that mawkish German proverb about *Kinder, Kirche und Küche*, but there isn't an artist alive worth his or her salt who hasn't profited from the inspiration of a good old-fashioned love affair."

"But—"

"Now no 'buts,' young lady," her peppery teacher retorted. "Maybe I'm a spinster, but I can assure you that I speak from personal experience—not that you have to go mentioning it all around Murganville. And I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Poor Amy—she never did find out what romance was all about, except for references in her history books." She suddenly cleared her throat as if it were a signal to change the subject. "Don't you think we'd better inform your uncle and aunt that they've an unexpected guest to dinner? Oh, and I'd better

telephone Amy so she won't think I've fallen into the creek or come down with megrims. Just because I'm seven years her junior, she thinks I'm helpless as a newborn baby."

"I'm sure she doesn't, Miss Bruce," Alice proffered, quickening her steps to keep up with the brisk walk of her indefatigible companion. "It's just her way of showing how fond she is of you."

Joanne Bruce chuckled and slackened her steps so that Alice could catch up. She patted her pupil's shoulder. "You're a good child," she said with that rough impatience that always characterized her most approving remarks, "and there's not a mean bone in your body. You would never think badly of anyone, not even that good-for-nothing Matt Harshaw."

Alice's eyes widened. How could Miss Bruce have known of the encounter at the shack? Surely she hadn't gone down to the bank of the creek. But the white-haired ceramist shook her head with a distasteful sniff and continued, "Now there's a young man with every advantage, and don't think he doesn't know it. He stands to inherit the best farm in Murganville, and a good deal of cash in the bank to boot. You'd think he'd knuckle down and try to show his father that he's got some appreciation. But it's David, his 18-year-old brother, who works hard on the land, while Matt goes traipsing around with girls and drinking more than's good for him. He knows he's his father's favorite, so he doesn't even make a pretense of facing up to his chores and obligations."

"His father's very sick, you know."

"Yes, of course he is. Old Grover's suffering with cancer—it'd be God's own mercy for him to die now. And that's all his worthless elder son is waiting for. But Grover's a stubborn old man. I think he's holding onto life just in the hope Matt turns out better than he's capable of doing. It's a shame—a leopard doesn't change its

spots, and Matt Harshaw won't ever be anything more than a parasite."

"I—I didn't know you knew him that well, Miss Bruce."

"I may be a retired old teacher who decided to give a few classes in this little town so I wouldn't feel I was ready for the boneyard yet, but I've always taken an interest in people, no matter who they are. Yes, I know Matt Harshaw. He nearly ran me down last summer when I was driving over here to see you. Liquored up, he was, and two girls in the front seat with him. And then he had the nerve to get out of the car and yell at me that I was a blind old bat and oughtn't to be allowed to drive if I didn't have enough brains to keep out of his way."

"He didn't! Oh, you never told me, Miss Bruce!" Alice gasped.

"No need to. Or to tell Amy, either. She'd have thrown a fainting fit for sure. Besides, he didn't hit my car, fortunately, though I had to swing off the road and nearly ran into a tree. But enough about that worthless scamp. I'm excited about this project, Alice, so let's go in and let me pay my respects to your uncle and aunt. Now you're sure they won't mind your inviting me?"

"Good gracious no, Miss Bruce," Alice laughed affectionately. "Aunt Greta will be only too happy to have someone special flatter her cooking. And you're very definitely someone special."

"Don't softsoap me, Alice. You're not trying to get a good grade out of me these days, child. Put that attention to your work so you can carry off the first prize. That'll be reward enough for me, I can tell you. Ah, here we are."

They had come to the house and were just past the shattered oak tree, when the door swung open at the top of the nine stone steps which led to it, and Otto Miller stood framed in the doorway, hands in his pockets. He

was six feet tall, and at fifty-five he was still wiry and sinewy. His black hair, heavily streaked with gray, retained a youthful curl over one side of his high-vaulted forehead. His mouth was thin and firm, his chin deeply cleft, with a tiny jagged scar disappearing under it all along the left jaw line. His brows were extremely thin and short, giving an accentuated prominence to his large, widely spaced, gray eyes set on either side of the pronounced bridge of a strong aquiline nose. He wore riding boots, khaki trousers and a light blue blazer over a khaki shirt—his customary attire when he was not presiding at the Council Hall, a somewhat grandiloquent name for the small civic office on Murganville's Main Street.

"Oh, hi, Uncle Otto, I've brought company," Alice called with a wave of her hand. "It's Miss Bruce, she's going to stay to dinner."

Otto Miller's somber face lightened with a polite smile, and he inclined his head. "Glad to see you, Miss Bruce. I'll go tell Greta to put on another plate. We've chicken and dumplings and sweet corn, and she' msade a fresh peach cobbler."

Joanne Bruce chuckled dryly. "I'm glad I came, Mr. Mayor. But you can be sure I won't tell Amy what the menu is, or for sure you'd have to put on still another plate. How are you, and how's that wonderful wife of yours? The best cook in Murganville, and I can vouch for that myself, you know."

Otto Miller stepped aside to let them enter. "Fine, thank you, Miss Bruce. I knew you were here when I saw your car over by the barn. I was out in the corn field choosing some ripe ears for our supper this evening, and I'm glad I thought to bring in a basketful. The early warm weather's been good for crops this year."

"You can attribute a good deal of that to your own green thumb, Mr. Mayor," Joanne Bruce laughed.

"Everybody around Murganville knows that you're one of the hardest-working farmers in the state, and you know your crops."

"A man tries to master at least one thing in his life," Otto Miller observed, "so he can feel he's achieved something useful."

"Well, I think your niece is going to be able to say that for herself before much longer, Mr. Mayor," Joanne Bruce said, her eyes twinkling as she glanced at her modestly diffident pupil. "I came over today to tell her about a national ceramics contest which she has a good chance of winning. And the prize is two thousand dollars, which has to be spent on a trip to one of Europe's major art centers, like Paris or Berlin or Rome."

Otto Miller's forehead creased, and he thoughtfully stroked his chin as he led the way to the kitchen. "But my niece goes back to college this fall, as you know, Miss Bruce. She'd hardly have time for a European trip."

"Of course she would, Mr. Mayor! The judges' decision will be made the fifteenth of August, and she'd have a whole month before the fall term starts. Even if she should be a few weeks late, her scholastic rating is high enough so they wouldn't mind. And the publicity if she wins would bring honor to the college, let me assure you," Miss Bruce's voice grew high-pitched with excitement.

"Well, we'll see, won't we? Of course, she has to win first," Otto Miller gruffly replied.

"She can, believe me. And she will, if she shows half the skill her father had in pottery."

Otto Miller stopped at the kitchen door, his lips tightening. He turned to eye his smiling niece, then he regarded Miss Bruce, his face impassively stern. "I am sure you mean well, Miss Bruce, and you've done a great deal for my beloved niece. But I should be grateful if my

brother's name was not mentioned in this house. Alice herself knows why."

Then, blandly, his thin lips curving in a polite smile, he added, "Now let's go tell my wife you're here, Miss Bruce. She'll be delighted. She thinks so very highly of you, as I do."

Seven

Greta Miller, her round jovial face flushed from the heat of the stove and the exigencies of serving as well as preparing the evening meal, set down the Pyrex dish of peach cobbler with a warning: "It's still hot, Miss Bruce. You'd better use the pot holders." She seated herself at the table, then added coyly, "I knitted them myself, you know. Alice isn't the only artist in the family."

Otto Miller shot her an angry look as he interposed, "Let me serve you, Miss Bruce, please. What Greta's trying to say is that she worked with me in our art shop in Berlin before we came to Murganville."

"Mmm, that looks simply delicious," Joanne Bruce sighed. "I don't know where I'll put it, but I'm not going to let that stop me."

"And there's some fresh clotted cream I've been chilling in the refrigerator. Alice, dear, would you mind getting it?" Greta Miller asked, patting her moist forehead with her napkin. Though only forty-seven, she had not fared so well with the years; her blonde hair was gray and straggly, and her round pert face showed the sign of fleshy jowls, while what was once a ripely curved

figure had deteriorated into stoutness, especially at hips and bosom. Her puffy cheeks had come to narrow the large blue eyes of her youth, giving them a shrewish quality, but their glance was furtive now as she regarded her husband across from her at the head of the table in the attractively furnished dining room. There was little inside the old Murgan house to indicate its actual age, unless it was the winding stairway to the second floor with its heavy scrolled bannister and its thickly carpeted red velvet steps; though faded with the years, the velvet was still far from threadbare, and Otto Miller had never replaced it.

"Of course I will, Aunt Greta." Alice gracefully rose and went to the kitchen. Otto Miller turned to Miss Bruce, who waited with ill-concealed impatience to tackle the generous portion of peach cobbler he had piled on her plate.

"I didn't mean to sound so abrupt, Miss Bruce," he placated, with a cool, thin-lipped smile, "but every family has its skeleton. Yes, even ours. I wanted you to understand this; and if you would not mention to Alice what I'm saying to you . . . You see, I know she has learned that Heinrich Müller, the great German potter, was her father. But she knows too that he forsook his art to become a Nazi—one of those swastika-wearing monsters who set my homeland back a thousand years. That is why we do not discuss his name in this house, Miss Bruce. The memories are too painful for me, and she respects my feelings. She herself is content to know that her father created beautiful things—that is all she needs to know. It is best to remember that and nothing else about Heinrich Müller."

"I—I understand." Alice came through the dining-room doorway with the pitcher of cream, and Miss Bruce beamed at Otto Miller and remarked, "They say your cows give the richest cream in Murganville, Mr. Mayor.

Hurry, Alice dear—I can't wait any longer to try your aunt's tempting cobbler!"

"I do hope you like it," Greta Miller cooed. "I must have guessed we'd have an important guest tonight, that's why I took such pains with it."

Alice helped Miss Bruce to the cream, and the white-haired ceramist forked a generous mouthful, then estatically rolled her eyes. "Perfectly heavenly, Mrs. Miller! You must give me the recipe—though I shan't dare tell Amy that I sampled it this very night, she'd never forgive me."

"*Ach*, there's plenty, you will take some home to your sister, *Fräulein* Bruce!" Greta Miller declared.

Otto Miller dabbed at his tightly set lips with his napkin, glaring at his wife. "Greta, we are Americans and I am the mayor here. We speak American, not German, please to remember," he said, stiffly hostile.

"I'm sorry, Otto." Greta was instantly contrite, lowering her eyes, while a deep blush spread over her bovine face.

"The Germany that was before Hitler is no more, and we have our lives here, with Alice," he went on as he poured out coffee first for Miss Bruce, then himself, from a shiny copper pot with ornate spout. "And she has been in Murganville since she was a few months old—she does not need to think of the past."

Greta fiddled with her fork, her own portion of cobbler as yet untouched. "I said I was sorry, Otto dear."

"So. It is well to remember what we have, not what we were. I for one thank God I found refuge here and built a new life. But so much of that. Now then, Miss Bruce, what is this contest you were telling me about, the one you want Alice to enter?"

"It was a wonderful dinner, Mrs. Miller, and thank you again." Joanne Bruce rose from the table with a glance

at Alice. "If you've no objection, I'm going to steal your niece away for a while. We want to talk over the contest and make plans for Alice's entry."

Otto Miller rose, lighting a cigar. "You mean someone will pay two thousand dollars for a piece of pottery?" he asked with a wry smile. "I wish Greta and I had had customers like that—well, no matter."

The teacher turned to him. "You had an art shop, you said, Mr. Mayor. Did you handle jewelry or painting or pottery?"

A shadow passed over his face, and he drew on his cigar a few times before replying. Then he said curtly, "Some of everything. One did one's best to stay alive in those dreadful times. And of course, during the war, one had to rely on faithful customers—those who still had money and admired fine things in spite of everything that was going on. But there's no point remembering those days, Miss Bruce. I have forgotten my German ancestry, and I hope the people of Murganville don't hold it against me."

"But why should they, Mr. Mayor? Here you are, re-elected to your office, and you've held it for six years. I think that's fairly evident proof they admire what you've done here. Well, again, Mrs. Miller, I can't thank you enough for that marvelous dinner. And you must remember to write down the recipe for that peach cobbler for me."

"I do it right now, before you go, Miss Bruce," Greta Miller eagerly exclaimed. "If you will wait a moment, I go to the kitchen and take pencil and paper, so." And with a smiling nod, she rose and left the dining room.

"Alice, may I speak to you alone for a moment, please?" Otto Miller suddenly asked. "Miss Bruce, you'll excuse us, won't you?"

"Of course. I'll just go out to the kitchen and get that recipe, Mr. Mayor."

"By now," he replied, "you know me well enough to call me by my name, Miss Bruce. In my home here, I am Otto Miller, not the mayor. It is too formal, this title. I am just a farmer, you know."

"I didn't mean to offend you, of course," Miss Bruce countered. "I call you that out of respect for your office."

He nodded curtly, then beckoned to Alice, who wonderingly followed him out of the room into the little hallway which led to the spacious living room.

"Matt Harshaw came to the house just before you and Miss Bruce arrived," he murmured. "What did you do to him? He was very angry."

Alice flushed with indignation at the tone of reproof in her uncle's voice. "What did I do to him, Uncle Otto? Didn't you ask him what he did to me? He was insulting, and he kissed me. And so I threw my bucket of clay in his face. I told him I'd take care of the bill if he sent it to you for his shirt."

"He did that? He tried to—to make love to you?"

"If you can call it that. He said I wasn't to put on airs, just because I was the mayor's niece."

"*The Schweinhund!*" Otto Miller's eyes narrowed and his lips compressed. Then he smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "Never mind, my dear. I know this Matt Harshaw. He waits for old Grover to die so he can have all the money and the land. He thinks because his father is the wealthiest man in town, he is not to be crossed. It is only that—you see, in my position . . ."

Alice stiffened as if she had been slapped. "He was a coward to come whining to you, Uncle Otto. A real man wouldn't have done that, I can assure you. And I'm not sorry. But I thought you'd be more conerned with the way he behaved towards me than to worry about losing the Harshaws' vote the next time you run for office."

"Alice! I will have respect in my house—you forget yourself!"

"You just told Miss Bruce that in your own house you were just a farmer, that you thought the title of mayor was too formal. And you're my uncle, and I'm in your care till I'm twenty-one—that's the law, I know. And you know I didn't lead him on. I thought you'd have stood up for me when he came to complain about my spoiling his shirt. I see I was wrong."

"Come, come, dear, you're making too much out of a little unpleasantness, that's all. Of course I stand up for you, Alice. Only—"

"Only your first thought was to scold me for offending Matt Harshaw, without wondering what caused me to do it, Uncle Otto. Please let's drop the whole thing. I didn't mean to speak so plainly—as you say, I'm probably making too much out of a little unpleasantness. Besides, here comes Miss Bruce back from the kitchen—we don't want her to overhear a family argument, do we? I—I'm going out to the studio with her, Uncle Otto. I'll say good night."

Tears stung her eyes as, pale and quivering, Alice Miller turned and went to rejoin her old teacher.

Eight

"I THINK," Miss Bruce ventured, "you can make everything on the wheel except your tray, Alice. For that I'd use a mold."

"I agree with you, Miss Bruce. And I think a white glaze with black trim will be very striking."

"It's classic and pure, and yet your shapes, Alice, will suggest the originality. You ought to get the feel of the cylinder and throw a few pots, increasing their narrowness and height. And an ornamental lid, don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes. I can already seek the sugar bowl. Of course, I'll use calipers to measure the inside of the bowl rim."

"Quite right. These pieces have to be functional and suggest use, even if they aren't standard commercial shapes."

"I have enough clay in the studio already, really."

"Of course you do, my dear. But if the first test pieces aren't satisfactory, you'll want extra stock so that all the items of the service will be of the same texture."

"I—I dug some up this afternoon, just before you came—but I didn't get a chance to dry it."

"Oh?" Miss Bruce looked at Alice, brows raised. She

seemed to sense that something was being held back, but she was never in a hurry to prod for explanations. Over the years that she had worked with her star pupil, she understood that Alice would come to terms with facts and events in her own good time, and that sufficed.

"Yes—I—I was digging in the bank, where I usually do. And I'd got quite a bit of that nice porous clay you liked so much. And then—and then—Matt Harshaw came along."

"I see. Was that what your uncle wanted to talk to you about when I was in the kitchen?"

Alice colored as she nodded. "He—he was hiding in the shack—"

"That nasty, sneaking, worthless trash!" There were times when Joanne Bruce was fiercely outspoken, and this was one of them.

Alice shrugged. "That's the way he's made, Miss Bruce. Maybe it wasn't all his fault."

"Not all his fault indeed! You've much too much Christian charity in your makeup, Alice. As I recall, he wasn't much better back in school. The fault was he always knew he could count on his father's money to get him out of scrapes. And don't think he didn't take advantage of it, either!"

"Well, you can't blame him for being born into a wealthy family. And maybe if his father had been poor, things would have been different."

"I don't believe in mollycoddling juvenile delinquents, and that's all Matt Harshaw is, except that he's overgrown. Well, let's not talk about him any more—except—" She looked at Alice with concern. "He—he didn't harm you?"

"Oh, no!—I'm afraid it was the other way around. He—he kissed me—and then he said something insulting—and—and I lost my temper and flung the bucket of clay right in his face."

"Good for you, Alice girl!" Miss Bruce said. "It's high time somebody showed him he can't go on his merry way riding roughshod over people. I wish I could have been there and clobbered him one myself for trying to run me down that time!"

"Miss Bruce, you sound bloodthirsty," Alice laughed, her eyes crinkling and her small, perfect white teeth beaming.

"Well, I was never a bloodless kind of teacher, you can believe me. Now that we've got him out of our system, let's talk about the pieces you're going to enter, my dear."

"Oh, yes, let's."

"Let me see, you've cut and wedged a lot of clay the past few days, haven't you?"

Alice nodded. "At least twenty times over, Miss Bruce. And I've about a dozen big balls already wedged and wrapped in a damp cloth for immediate use."

"That's fine. I know you're very good on casting bowls, but your biggest problem will be with that cylindrical coffee pot."

"I know. I'll work very hard on it. Now about the glaze for the pieces—I was thinking the handle and the lid ought to be in the black trim, the rest in white. And the sugar bowl lid in black, and the handle of the creamer, and the flanges of the tray."

"It sounds elegant, Alice. Purity and simplicity above all else, that's what you need in this craft. Just as in life. There's a connection there, you know. And you're so much less worldly than I, my dear, that you're closer to those qualities than I'll ever be."

"Now you're making fun of me, Miss Bruce," Alice blushed.

"I'd never do that, Alice. Now let's visualize our design . . . how do you see the coffee pot?"

"This way." Her slim fingers deftly guided a black

crayon over a sketch pad, and there emerged an elongated tapering shape, with wide-lipped top from which the coffee would pour, and over it a delicately rounded lid, and a curving handle.

"Beautiful," Miss Bruce murmured, her eyes soft with admiration. "And difficult to throw in one piece on your wheel. Your fingers will need all their skill to attain that elegance of line. And now, dear, you ought to mold a few practice models till you get the feel of it."

"Yes, I want to. Will you watch me and correct me?"

"Not correct you, Alice, for then I'd be a teacher imposing my opinion over yours—which would be wrong. In this contest, what you do must be deeply felt. It must be your very own expression, not hindered or restricted. The way I would do it might differ from yours, so I'd be wrong to tell you what you must feel. Now—how tall will your coffee pot be?"

"I thought about fourteen or fifteen inches."

"There I agree completely, because it mustn't be too unwieldly to be functional, even if your form has freedom to it."

As Miss Bruce spoke, Alice put her smock back on and put one of the balls of still moist clay on a plaster bat that she had fixed to the potter's wheel with three wads of clay. Though motor-driven, her wheel had a device for slowing the speed by foot.

Standing now, her eyes fixed on the wheel, she set it into motion, and as it moved, her fingers deftly touched here, there . . . her lips parted in a little smile as the concentration of work, the dedication to craftsmanship, took possession of her. Miss Bruce watched admiringly as, swift and sure, the slim fingers worked. The young woman's face seemed lighted by that inner spirit that motivated her, giving her features a warmth of emotion that made her truly beautiful.

The centrifugal force of the turning wheel fought

Alice's efforts; it sought to make the top of the cylindrical pot start to spread. But Alice's hands cupped the base to achieve the flawless lines, then, holding that position, moved back to the top and mastered the clay.

When she stopped, the linear proportions of the clay were very nearly those of her crayoned design.

"It's beautiful, dear," Miss Bruce said softly. "You don't need me around any more tonight. Feel out the pieces, just as you did with that cylinder, till you're sure in your fingers and your heart that you've done your best. Maybe I'll come by in a week to see how the project is progressing. Meanwhile I'll write Henry Meyers airmail right away to send you an entry blank. Oh—and don't forget—packing your pieces carefully for mailing across the country is almost as important as creating the pieces themselves—if they arrive cracked or broken, you've done it all for nothing. I can help you there—heaven knows, I've sent off enough pieces of my own for exhibitions and contests. Good night, dear—and thank your Aunt Greta again for me for that wonderful meal."

She took Alice's clay-smeared hand, holding it in her right palm, regarding it, observing the strength yet delicacy of the slim fingers. Then she kissed the young woman on the cheek. "You'll win, I know you will. Those fingers have the skill your great father had."

"Miss Bruce—" Alice stammered, regarding her teacher with an almost imploring look.

"I know. Your uncle told me. But even if it's true, all you remember of him are these beautiful things. And surely, when he created them—for many of them date before the war, you know—his fingers knew only beauty and sensitivity. Hold to that thought, my dear child. I think I can understand now what you've lived with all these years. But if you've inherited anything, Alice, it's your father's artistic sensitivity. And perhaps your own secret unhappiness has been the leavening that was

needed to make you an even greater artist than he was—yes, I feel it, seeing that first throw of yours. Now I'll say good night—and God bless you, Alice."

She cleared her throat, straightened, as if embarrassed by the sentiment she had just expressed, gave Alice a curt nod, and walked out of the studio-barn.

Alice stood looking after her, and her eyes were brimming with tears.

Nine

The next week was one of the most absorbing and demanding in Alice Miller's life. Alone in the studio-barn, isolated from the world, she focussed all her thoughts and expression on the inanimate dark clay dug from the bank of the creek, cut and wedged and dried for final working.

She even took her meals to the studio, seeking a total communion with her medium and with the concept that medium would help her realize. The first few days, she traced and retraced countless designs for the sugar bowl, the creamer and the tray, but she was not satisfied with them, impatient when their pattern on paper did not blend with the skillful, eloquent lines she had conjured up for the coffee pot itself; tall, chastely elegant, functional, yet impeccably flowing and free in its design, it had to be perfect, so that each curve, each ascent, seemed meaningful and compelling, each a flawless part of a flawless whole.

Between conceived pattern and the realization of the wheel, there comes the seemingly interminable, often agonizingly frustrating time of throwing the clay into the shape in pursuit of the desired pattern. It is then that this inanimate substance seems to have a will, a form,

a strength of its own that defies the potter's fingers, saying, "You think yourself my clever master. Very well. Control me in every whorl and curve, dominate me into the obedient shape your mind seeks. See, I am here before you on the wheel, awaiting your guidance. Now you falter. So you are not my clever master after all!"

On Sunday, the Fourth of July, after a week of heartbreaking futility, everything seemed to jell. With the large ball of clay on the wheel, Alice started the motor and pushed her thumbs down in the center of the ball to open it. Now, as the clay whirled round and round, her thumbs and index fingers shaped the wall, then raised it. Slowing the wheel, she squeezed the clay between her left index finger and the knuckle of her right, drawing the clay upwards. And then the pulling-up manuever, where both hands start at the bottom, pressing towards each other to thin the wall and create a roll of clay above the fingers.

And this time, the cylinder was pure and true, its sides straight and smooth, the graceful flaring at the top true to Alice's crayon sketch. From the broader base, the diameter of the cylinder narrowed as it ascended, yet maintained the graceful sweep that caught the eye, just as Miss Bruce had seen the sketch and known it to be right.

And now the piece must dry slowly, or the clay would crack. It would take from ten days to two weeks before she could fire it. Then the glaze would be applied and a final time the decorated piece would be fired. And the creamer, the sugar bowl and the tray would be made the same way, then fired, then glazed, then fired a last time. All of them would have to have the same consistency, with a uniformity of glaze, so that the completed set would have a oneness in texture as well as decor, each piece complementing the other precisely and harmonious to the eye and to the touch.

Carefully she set the cylinder on a plaster bat on the shelf at the back of the barn, holding her breath as if the slightest movement might alter the proportions. She had calculated the shrinkage in drying—there were so many factors to reckon with in the time between creation and completion. The Divine Potter had taken clay and made the world and all its wonders in six short days; the human potter, with his frailities and flaws, might take a month or more to produce one infinitesimal piece that captured lasting beauty.

It was late evening when Alice set the shaped clay coffee pot on the shelf, looked at it one last exultant time, then went out, locking the door behind her. The sky was dusky-blue, with overtones of purple and orange from the sunset, and in the east, where a picnic grove was sited a dozen miles out of town, she could see soaring Roman candles and their exuberant bursts into dazzling sprays that streaked the sky.

From a distance came the rumble of thunder. It had been a scorching day, but the barn was relatively cool. Now, outdoors, the heat embraced her, engulfed her like the gust from a blast furnace; as she listened to the repeated rumble, she thought only of the newly formed pottery on the shelf. The barn was leakproof, and she had no fears about the clay. Previous summers had eased her concern on that score; not a drop of rain, even in the heaviest downpour, had touched the shelves where the clay dried before it was fired into permanence.

Aunt Greta was in the kitchen, washing the supper plates. "I kept it for you in the refrigerator, *Liebchen*," she greeted Alice. "You look so tired—*ach*, you've been slaving all week long. How does the work come?"

"Slowly. But the coffee pot's done, Aunt Greta. And I think it's good. Now it has to dry for at least a week. Tomorrow I'll start on the other pieces."

"This contest, it means a lot to you, *nicht wahr*,

Liebchen?" Greta Miller's plump face was creased with solicitude, and she glanced furtively at the door while she spoke.

"Yes it does, Aunt Greta. I don't know why—it came up so suddenly when Miss Bruce showed me a letter, but now I know I have to enter. And I want to win if I can. At least I'll find out if I've as much skill as Miss Bruce thinks I have."

"You must do what you feel you must," Greta Miller said quickly, again glancing at the kitchen door. "Only you must think of your rest and your meals, too. If you work so hard and don't take care of yourself, you will be sick. Your uncle is worried about you, *wirklich.*"

It was strange, Alice thought. Aunt Greta had over the years made a conspicuous effort not to speak a word of German in her presence, yet this evening she was lapsing into her native tongue, in the tender words one might use to a child. And these glances at the door—Alice knew that Uncle Otto didn't like her aunt to speak German; perhaps she was afraid he might come in and overhear her.

"He shouldn't be worried, Aunt Greta. Nor should you. I'm doing what I love best—I'm happy when I work at something that forces me to show what's really in me."

"If—if you don't win—would it make you unhappy, *Kindchen?*"

Alice frowned, searching for an answer that would ease her aunt's well-meant solicitude. "If I found out that I didn't have the ability I think I have, no, not really. I would then know that I had a long way to go before I'm really capable as a potter."

"Yes, that is a good way to look at it, so that you are not too disappointed. But—if you do win, then you will go to Europe?"

"That's what the contest says, Aunt Greta. The win-

ner has to spend the money seeing a big European city where there's an art center. I think, too, they might want the winner to write his or her impressions of what goes on there, compared with our own art culture."

"Perhaps winning would make you famous, *Liebchen.* Like—your father." Again the hasty glance at the door.

"I don't know, Aunt Greta. I have so much to learn yet. And he—his work is magnificent. The pictures in that book Miss Bruce lent me—" Alice made a gesture with both hands as if to express the impossibility of description. "I'll be satisfied if I become a good teacher. Maybe I can teach ceramics the way Miss Bruce does, and maybe I can help young people to develop their gifts. That's all anyone can expect, unless one is very ambitious."

"*Ja, das ist richtig.* Sometimes I think ambition is a curse of mankind, *Liebchen.* People could be happier with so much less, if they only knew—" Greta Miller suddenly stopped, and began to wipe the first of the stack of dishes with an unusual vigor.

Otto Miller had just come into the kitchen, a cigar in his hand, his eyes narrowed and cold, his lips thinned in a nervous grimace.

"Oh, I was just going to have supper, Uncle Otto. I finished the first piece," Alice quickly interposed, to divert his attention from her buxom aunt at the sink.

"Good. I had had a phone call from David Harshaw. Something terrible has happened." His voice was heavy and somber.

"*Herr Gott, was ist's?*" Greta Miller whirled, open-mouthed, clutching the dishtowel in a plump trembling hand.

"That fool of a Matt. This time he's really done it!"

"What is it, Uncle Otto?"

"It will kill old Grover, that is certain, when he hears the news. That dunderhead Matt and his women and his

whiskey—*ach*, this time he has disowned himself, you mark my words. David told me—Matt had that *Dirne*, Jennie Forse, in his car, driving to East St. Louis, they were, for a good time, no doubt. Matt had been drinking. The car smashed into a culvert. Jennie was killed instantly. And Matt is badly cut and has a few broken ribs—the drunkards and the fools are always lucky. But he won't be lucky when his father hears of the scandal Matt has brought upon him."

"How terrible!" Alice shuddered. "That poor girl—"

"She is well out of it," Otto Miller intoned. "What life did she have here, or expect to have, a girl who went into the bushes with every man—"

"Otto! You must not speak so in front of Alice!" Greta Miller protested.

"I—I'm not a child, Aunt Greta. I knew about Jennie. Everybody did. But she couldn't be blamed, not with her background."

"You have a good heart, but don't waste it on useless people. When you grow older, you will understand this," her uncle sternly told her. "So she's dead. But Matt is alive, and when Grover Harshaw learns what he has done, I swear to you he will disinherit him. That is what I would do if I had such a son. In Germany we were stricter, we—"

He caught himself short. His face took on a grim cast, and his lips curled with a bitter contempt. Alice had never seen him like that before; her eyes widened. Catching her gaze, he drew a deep breath and forced a casual smile to his ascetic lips. "Forgive me, Alice. I didn't mean to sound so heartless. Of course I'm sorry about Jennie. But it's a mercy she died without suffering."

"Yes . . . of course, Uncle Otto."

"Go eat your supper, then. I am going over to Grover Harshaw's place. David asked me to break the news. It is because old Grover trusts me and I am the mayor."

He nodded to Alice, took a straw hat down from a hook on the kitchen wall, and his umbrella, and left the house.

"It's terrible, all this," Greta Miller sighed.

"Yes, Aunt Greta." *And what if I had found Matt Harshaw attractive and gone with him on a date—it might have been I in that car and not poor Jennie Forse,* Alice thought. She shivered. What ever made her think of such an idea, when Matt was so repellent? Was it a subconscious curiosity—or was it the hidden taint which, too, might be her father's legacy to her, the instinct to look upon the face of evil and not find it hideous?

Ten

WITHIN THE next ten days, Alice completed her pattern for the sugar bowl and the creamer, and threw her practice forms on the wheel. These being successful, she was able to form the two pieces and set them on the shelf to dry. For the creamer, she harmonized its shape with that of the coffee pot, making the former smaller. For the sugar bowl, she used a rib, a special wooden tool, to form the rim, and took calipers to measure the inside of the rim to assure its proper proportions. The decorative lid for the sugar bowl, with its quaint knob, had to provide ample space for the fingers to lift it, yet the knob could not be overly elongated.

Miss Bruce visited her several times during that intensively creative period. The white-haired ceramist came as an onlooker this time, not as a critic. "If I say this or that should be different, dear," she explained, "I would be altering the expression you feel. I'll just say that I'm very proud of you. They're beautiful."

She also had news of Matt Harshaw. With the imperviousness of a chorus from a Greek tragedy, she told Alice, "Old Grover Harshaw's made a settlement to Mrs. Forse. And he's cut Matt off with a few thousand dollars

and told him to go it on his own somewhere else. David's to get the farm. It serves that inconsiderate young man right—for once he's had the come-uppance that was so long overdue."

"I'm sorry for him just the same."

"I told you you're much too forgiving, my dear. Besides, Matt won't forget what happened for the rest of his life. He was badly scarred in the accident. I dare say he won't be quite such a ladykiller any more," Miss Bruce declared with grim satisfaction. "But the news I want to hear is that you'll be ready to ship your set off to New York. The tray's all that's left, isn't it, my dear?"

"Yes. Tomorrow I'll make the drape mold for it. I've taken longer than I should have on these first three pieces, because I didn't want them to look too commercial."

"And they don't. They've a beautiful rightness to them. They look new, free, and yet classic. Not outlandish or severe, but flowing and free—unhampered. You felt every curve and line in your fingers, and your fingers were true to what you sought to express." She glanced at her watch. "And now I've got to run. I promised Amy I'd go into town and bring her back some horehound candy."

"Is she feeling well?"

Joanne Bruce sniffed. "She is not. To hear her rant, you'd think she'd come down with a dozen obscure maladies all at once. Confidentially, that's a sign she's in fine fettle. You know Amy by now. Well, I'll see you in a few days, dear. You're going to fire the entire set all on the same day, aren't you?"

"Yes. And I'll have my glaze all worked up, so as soon as I take the set out of the kiln, I can paint it on, then fire again the same day. And then, with luck, it'll be ready for shipment."

"You know, it's strange, dear," Miss Bruce said reflec-

tively as she turned to go. "Your aunt seems so eager for you to win. When I stop by to see her and pay my respects, she always asks me how the work is going and that she so much wants you to have your chance. But the strange thing is, whenever she talks to me, she always looks about as if she were afraid someone would overhear her praise you. Now I wonder why that is?"

"I don't know," Alice replied as she stepped back to look at the pieces on the shelf. "Maybe it's because Aunt Greta is more . . . well, more emotional than my uncle. That's only natural."

"Perhaps." She paused on the threshold of the door and eyed Alice cautiously. "But I've the impression your uncle isn't at all interested in your winning. Or making that European trip. Well, here's wishing you luck with the tray tomorrow, dear. If it turns out as beautifully as the others, I've no doubts at all about your chances. And when you win—as I know you're going to—I do want you to pick up a few little things for me in Paris—would you?"

"I wish I had your confidence in me," Alice laughed, affectionately going up to her teacher and kissing her on the cheek. "But of course I will—if I win and if I go."

"I'm going to hold you to that, dear. Goodbye now. And get a good night's sleep so you can tackle that tray mold tomorrow with all the skill you can summon."

In achieving artistic ceramic design, the potter will often drape a layer of clay over a mound of plaster of Paris. The work is quicker and the inside of the piece is smoother. The plaster mound, or drape mold, makes it possible to reproduce the shapes of objects. And since plaster, when dry, acts like a sponge, it draws moisture out of any clay that rests upon it, thus speeding the formative process.

It took Alice a full day to make her drape mold for the

coffee service tray and dry it thoroughly. Then, rolling out a layer of clay, she laid it on the mold, pressing it into shape till it could be lifted off and smoothed and given its final surface. Finally, she made two decorative handles, shaping them with her fingers, and deftly fitted them on the sides of the oval tray.

Now this piece too must wait upon the drying shelf till it was ready to be fired. She had already prepared her glaze, experimenting with it on several small pieces to be certain that the texture and finish would be precisely what she had envisioned for the completed set. The rich deep white, the bold black trim, came out of the kiln just as she had hoped they would. And now she was impatient to fire the entire set to give it its bisque-ware firmness. Only time stood between her and the completion of her arduous work.

On the twenty-second of July, examination of the four pieces of the set left on the drying shelf revealed that each had properly dried and could now be fired. With prayerful impatience, she heated the kiln and cautiously set the pieces inside. Now, if her calculations were correct, her workmanship would emerge unflawed. The lids of the coffee pot and the sugar bowl were placed upon their tops; they fitted perfectly, and the fit would be the better for this initial firing. When the set was glazed, however, the lids would have to be removed and set by themselves, lest the glaze of the lid run into the piece to which it was joined.

Excitement welled up in her as she entered the studio-barn two days later to open the kiln and see the results of her so carefully planned labors. Her mind had been so preoccupied all these past weeks with the thought of the contest and the innumerable details of preparing her entry for it that she now felt exhausted. Now only one step remained prior to submitting her entry . . . assuming she had heated the kiln so it would fire up to the required

temperature; and once that temperature was reached, the kiln would be turned off and the pieces allowed to cool inside. Excessive firing could easily break them. And here again the mechanics of her art might well defeat all the sensitive designing which her fingers had achieved.

Breathlessly and with a prayer, she opened the kiln. Her pieces stood, immaculate in the shapes into which she had formed them. Their texture was as she had striven to make it. And now she entered upon that all-important final step.

She did not spray on her glaze. Instead, she painted, so that she would have at all times the feeling of the decorative touch, so that her fingers might control it just as they had controlled the clay on the rotating wheel. The rich white, the bold black trim, were no longer in her imagination, but there on the fired clay to see. And now a last firing would perpetuate them indelibly; a hundred years from now and longer still, the totality of her artistic concept would be registered for people to see.

Carefully she put the pieces back into the kiln, firing it to the temperature required for the glaze she had mixed and calculated. And now it was done, for right or wrong. It would be the twenty-sixth of July when the pieces were ready to be packed and shipped, and the contest deadline was the first of August. It had taken her longer than she had planned, but she knew that she had done her best.

And on the undersides of each of the pieces, she had impressed her initials, merging the letters "A" and "M," just as she had observed her father had done; his initials, "H" and "M," interwoven, the "H" slightly larger, appeared on each of the pieces illustrated in Miss Bruce's book. To differentiate her work, she had made the "M" larger in her own design.

Miss Bruce had come to the studio-barn that last after-

noon, just after Alice had finished painting on the glaze and placing the decorated set in the kiln; and at Alice's invitation she stayed to supper. For once, her conversation was free of Amy's imaginary plight; indeed, she was most pleasantly garrulous, much to Alice's surprise and pleasure. For her cheerful, talkative mood exactly reflected Alice's intense satisfaction at having completed the task to which she had set herself, and now she sought relaxation and companionship in the warm aura of congeniality her teacher tried to evoke at the supper table.

"Well, Mr. Miller," she exclaimed with a radiant smile, "I can tell you now, as something of an authority on the subject, that your niece has done magnificent work. It will be sent off air express to New York in a few days, and I won't be surprised at all if you should have to get along without Alice for the rest of the summer. Of course, the judges' decision won't be given till the fifteenth of August, but I'm so confident I'm almost thinking of booking passage to Europe myself."

"Oh, that would be perfectly wonderful, Miss Bruce! I'd so love to have you—we could visit the museums and look at tapestries and paintings and get ideas for ceramic design," Alice said excitedly. Then her face fell. "But here I go counting my chickens before they're hatched. It's a long way till August fifteenth, and there'll be hundreds of artists entering from all over the country."

"Never you mind, dear. I feel it in my bones you're going to win. Call it a hunch or anything else you like, but I think that set is utterly breathtaking. I only wish I could have done work half as good as that."

Alice's cheeks became rosy. "Oh, now you're praising me more than I deserve, dear Miss Bruce. I'm very happy with the way my work's turned out, but I've still a great deal to learn."

"So has every artist, but you've a whole long life ahead

of you, my dear. And someday they'll be putting out a monograph about your work, just as they did about your father—"

Miss Bruce stopped short in her exuberance. Across the table, she met Otto Miller's unflinchingly inimical gaze. Flustered, she turned to Greta at her right and stammered, "I meant to compliment you on this marvellous *Wienerschnitzel*. You simply must give me the recipe, Mrs. Miller."

"A monograph about Heinrich Müller?" Otto Miller coldly interposed. "Now that is something I did not know about. How have you found this out, may I ask?"

"Why, it's very simple, Mr. Miller," the white-haired teacher replied, trying to make her voice sound as casual as possible. "When I had that letter from Henry Meyers telling me about the contest Alice is entering, I wrote back to him saying she was going to submit her pieces and that in my opinion she'd inherited much of the sensitive skill of Heinrich Müller. After all, pictures of his work are in several books, and—"

"But the monograph," Otto Miller pursued. "I knew of no such work."

"I was coming to that," Miss Bruce explained, with a nervous glance at Alice, who was following this dialogue with strained attentiveness. "Henry Meyers found it in a New York art book shop and sent it on to me. It just arrived today, and I brought it along as a surprise for Alice."

"I see. But then," Otto Miller shrugged, picked up his fork and went back to dallying with his plate of *Wienerschnitzel*, "it is not surprising, truly. I have already told my niece that her father had great genius for his craft—but that is all that I say about him. I prefer not to discuss the matter further, if you do not mind, Miss Bruce."

"No, no, of course not, I didn't mean to irritate you, Mr. Miller. It only struck me as strange—"

He raised his face to stare at her, brows fiercely knitted, eyes narrow and cold. "What struck you as strange, Miss Bruce?" he interrupted, his voice harshly sibilant.

"I read a little German, you see. And the monograph was published in Leipzig just last year. And it said that he died during the war in Paris, where he had a studio. But I thought he was German—"

"He was a National Socialist, Miss Bruce. A Nazi. I told you the subject is very painful to us all, and I do not appreciate your constantly bringing it up in this house. Least of all before Alice, who ought not to have to suffer because of the defections of a father who took his own life after begging me, his brother, to adopt her as my own. Now, you see, you have made me say it. Are you satisfied with your meddling, Miss Bruce?"

Alice had never before seen her uncle's face so twisted with anger and hatred as now; his lips were curled in a sneer, his eyes lidded and furious, his nostrils twitching, and the dark blue vein at the top of his temples throbbing out against the thin skin.

But Miss Bruce was not easily cowed. Though her cheeks flamed with the indignation stirred up by his reprimand, she faced him, head high, as she retorted. "Whatever else her father may have been, he was a great artist, Mr. Miller. That will be remembered by thousands of people long after all of us are gone, in the pictures and the examples of his pottery. And Alice has no guilt in that inheritance, only pride. Pride in the skill he must have bequeathed her, and in her own truly original abilities. Things ought to be brought out into the open, Mr. Miller. It's never healthy to brood, and Alice isn't a child, she can reason all this for herself."

"I don't propose to argue the matter with you," Otto Miller said heavily, looking down at his plate. "We live today, not in the past. It is true that my niece has great gifts, and I wish her every success. I have tried to bring

her up as my own child, so that she would never be concerned with what had happened in Europe. Let us put an end to this distressing subject for all time to come, shall we, Miss Bruce? We are friends, and I am grateful for your help to my niece. Let it be thus, and nothing more."

"As you say, Mr. Miller." Her tone had an acid politeness. "I'm sorry if I irritated you. I'll give Alice the monograph. It doesn't, so far as I can tell, say too much about her father's life, but it's beautifully illustrated. It will be a keepsake for her, to remember the best of him, I think."

"Do as you please," Otto Miller answered gruffly. "You will probably do it anyway. Greta, please, more bread for the table."

"Yes, yes, at once, Otto." Greta Miller, her eyes big and round, hurriedly rose from the table and went out into the kitchen, and a tense silence fell upon the room.

Alice was trembling with emotion. She could hardly wait to see the monograph Miss Bruce had mentioned, yet she dared not ask for it here and now. But in her mind there rose the sudden anxious query that Miss Bruce had raised: how was it that, if Heinrich Müller had been a German of Berlin and a Nazi as her uncle had told her, the monograph would say that he had had a studio in Paris? And Otto Miller had not confirmed or denied that statement; he had only tried to keep Miss Bruce from continuing her conversation.

Was it possible, contrary to what Uncle Otto had led her to believe, that her father had gone to Paris and there worked for the Third Reich? After twenty years, it would be hard to find the truth. To whom would she turn to seek it? Where would she go to find those who might have known her father? And even if she met them, how would she know if what they told her was the truth? She had read enough about the Nuremberg trials to realize that many Germans had protested against being identified with the Nazi creed, had denied adherence to it,

had sworn they were no more than victims of circumstances by dint of being honest, peaceful citizens within a country gone mad. Yes, even if she could find her father's friends still alive after twenty years, and if he had been a Nazi, would they not try to whitewash him as well as themselves?

And did it really matter, when all was said and done? Why, now, after these years of having lived with the knowledge—or, rather, the belief in what her uncle had told her—was it so vital to her peace of mind that she learn for herself whether Heinrich Müller's artistic legacy to her had been flawed by the sinister heraldry of the swastika?

Wasn't it safer, surer, less disturbing to the tranquil life she led, to accept what had been said to her and to forget that which was disconcerting? Wasn't it enough that he had been a genius, and that as his daughter she already showed a modest skill that would help her gain her livelihood and perhaps some measure of fame?

Murganville was a small town and would always be a haven if she were content with that. She could emulate Miss Bruce, who had won laurels for her teaching and had settled down to an easygoing life free of tribulations, content to teach a few classes and keep herself young by stimulating young minds. That would be the obvious way, the one sure course of remaining emotionally free of the past. *What was done before I was born is no concern of mine,* she told herself.

But the answer did not satisfy her, nor did it ease the anxiety she suddenly felt. Least of all did it explain to her why her uncle should, so many years after it had all happened, be so vehemently angry at her father or at anyone who spoke of him. And if Otto Miller, so obsessed by the past, had not forgotten, could not forget it, there must be reasons that he had never made known to her.

Until she knew them, her mind would not let her rest.

Eleven

On the afternoon of July twenty-sixth, Alice opened her kiln, with Miss Bruce present, and took out the four glazed pieces. They surpassed even her own secret aspirations. The form was harmonious, the glaze a rich-lustered white and the black trim distinct and decorative, giving a most pleasing style to the set.

Miss Bruce helped her pack them carefully in a crate with excelsior and tissue and newspapers, so that nothing would move or bump together. She then drove her to the West Frankfort office of the REA where the crate was to be sent air express.

"There, now," the white-haired ceramist exhaled a long sigh of relief, "it's over. Now the rest is up to the judges—and if they've any appreciation of originality and beauty, you'll be getting a wire well before the fifteenth, mark my words."

"It's funny, Miss Bruce, but I don't seem to be excited now. Maybe it's the reaction from all that work. I was thrilled at the idea of entering, and I did my very best all through these last weeks. Now that the set is off to New York, I feel as if it's all over, and that I can wait very patiently for any news."

Her teacher patted her cheek. "I know, dear. I've felt that way too sometimes. You've lived in isolation so long, Alice—yes, it's true—that your emotions aren't so much for people as they are for the things you want to create. It's good that you've had this medium of expression, this wonderful gift for pottery. Because your aunt and uncle have kept you sheltered from almost everything else. It's as if you've lived in a vacuum all these years—yet I know you're sensitive and courageous and honest. You want to know a secret? I wanted you to win this contest so you could get that trip and meet people, take part in life, not lock yourself up in a studio in a little town and be content with throwing clay."

Alice flushed. "I suppose that's true." She was silent for a moment. Then she turned to ask, "Did you bring the monograph about my father, Miss Bruce?"

"Yes. I didn't want to give it to you the other night, not after the way your uncle acted. I told you before he doesn't seem to be interested in your winning. Or learning anything about your father. Don't you think that's odd?"

"I . . . I don't know. He must have his reasons, Miss Bruce. Maybe my father did something to hurt him—that could explain it."

"Perhaps. But it's almost an obsession with him—at least that's the impression I get. I know I'm just a meddlesome old woman—"

"You're nothing of the sort. I—I think you're the only true friend I really have, Miss Bruce," Alice blurted, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "My aunt and uncle have been very good to me—I can't ever thank Uncle Otto enough for giving me all those wonderful tools so I could make that set. And yet—I—I've always felt a little strange with him, ever since I first learned what he thought of my father. It's as if, inwardly, he was rejecting me, too. Maybe that is why I worked so hard to do something with

my pottery, so I could make a new life for myself and be independent."

"I've had that feeling all along, child," Miss Bruce said softly. "Now here's the monograph. I told you I could read a little German." She drew out the handsomely printed paperbound volume from a wide-mouthed knitted bag on the car seat. "Here you are, my dear. Keep it in the studio—that would be the best place."

"I will, Miss Bruce. Oh, I can't begin to thank you—"

"There's no need to thank me, Alice. If you'll notice, the monograph was printed last year in Leipzig by a well-known art publishing firm. As I say, I read enough German to get by. There's not too much history of your father's life. But it says he had a studio in Paris, and that he did some of his finest work in an old chateau in Varlier, which is a little town about fifty miles north of Paris. It says he died in 1945, just after the death of his wife in childbirth—your poor mother, Alice dear." She reached out to pat Alice's hand, then scowled at a young man who shot past her in a blue Buick. "Did you see the nerve of that young scoundrel there, trying to pass on such a narrow road? Just what Matt Harshaw would have done!"

"Have you heard anything about him, Miss Bruce?"

Miss Bruce snorted angrily. "I don't know why you should waste your time thinking about that one. Yes, I did, as it happens. Just yesterday I saw David at the grocery store. He told me that Matt left town right after he'd seen his father and got the money old Grover gave him. He didn't say where he was going or anything."

"Was he badly scarred?"

"Yes, he was. His face was all cut up and twisted."

"I—I feel as if—as if throwing that clay was a kind of omen, Miss Bruce. I flung it at his face without thinking, he made me so angry—and now—his face is scarred—"

"Fiddlesticks, Alice dear! You brood too much about things. It had nothing to do with his accident. Now where

was I—oh, yes, about the monograph. It said your father had a French mother and a German father who died as an officer in the First World War. And that your father had a famous studio in Paris right through the war, and he taught ceramics."

"Yet Uncle Otto came from Berlin, where he knew my father—that does seem strange," Alice mused. Then she hesitantly asked, "Does—does it say anything about —about the way he died, Miss Bruce?"

"It says—I hate to tell you this, dear —"

"I want to know. Uncle Otto says he killed himself. Is that true?"

Miss Bruce nodded without taking her eyes off the road. "It says he took poison. And in his will, he left his collection of prize-winning pottery to the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Paris. Well, you remember those full-color photographs in the book I lent you, dear. Several of those pieces were photographed at that museum. So that seems to check out. But what I can't figure out is how your uncle and your father could have been together, if your uncle had a shop in Berlin, as he says, before he came to this country after the war. Still and all, it's not my business, of course. Oh, well, let's not think about it any more, dear. What do you say to my standing treat to a fried chicken dinner at Norberg's on the highway? I've always wanted to eat there."

"I'd like that very much, Miss Bruce."

"And when you win the contest, you can blow us both to a bottle of champagne to celebrate," Miss Bruce added with a whimsical twinkle in her eyes.

"Miss Bruce!" Alice giggled. "Where in the world did you ever pick up an expression like that?"

"German isn't all I read, young lady," the elderly ceramist asserted. "I'm not so antiquated as one might think. I read lurid paperbacks and men's magazines too, just to keep up with my pupils."

Alice wagged her head from side to side. "You're amazing. There are so many things about you I don't know."

Miss Bruce smiled and gave her a quick affectionate glance as she maneuvered past a truck that had suddenly decided to turn right without signalling. "I might say the same about you, Alice dear. And some day I hope you find out all you want to know about yourself so you can be settled and your mind at ease. Then you'll produce your finest work."

The fried chicken was as good as Miss Bruce had anticipated, and she and Alice lingered over a second helping of strawberry shortcake and a second cup of coffee. The conversation was as mellow as the food, and Alice relaxed from the tensions of the preceding weeks as she listened to Miss Bruce's colorful account of her travels to the East and West Coast to visit art fairs. The white-haired ceramist had been to Europe only once, a decade before, and had visited Paris and London and parts of Holland. Her impressions of that trip succeeded in stimulating Alice's interest, and by the time they were ready to drive back to Murganville, Alice found herself earnestly hoping she might be fortunate enough to win the competition so she could emulate her teacher's pilgrimage to the exciting art centers of Europe.

"Thank you so much for the wonderful dinner, Miss Bruce, and for the monograph," Alice said as she got out of the car. "I'm going to read it right away, in the studio. I wish I understood German, though."

"Just underline any of the paragraphs that you think you want translated, and I'd be happy to do it for you, my dear," Miss Bruce said. "I enjoyed our outing today very much, too. It's the first time you and I have really been out together—and I do hope it won't be the last.

You—well, you seemed to come out of your shell a little, if you'll forgive the expression."

Alice nodded, with a rueful little smile. "I know what you mean, Miss Bruce. I've been so interested in working with clay and doing all the things you've taught me that I guess I haven't been very good company for anybody, really. And it's true that I don't have many friends in town."

"All the more reason for making a clean break and getting out and finding happiness for yourself. And that's exactly why I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the judges in New York will think the way I do about your set. Well, good night, Alice. Now don't you forget to keep in touch with me, and the first news you get about the decision, you call me!"

"I will, I promise. And thank you ever so much for everything—and I don't just mean tonight, Miss Bruce."

"Go along with you, girl!" Miss Bruce sniffed, but this time to hide a suspicious mistiness in her eyes. "Why shouldn't I help a promising pupil? I'm a selfish old woman and I rather enjoy being looked up to by such a gifted young person as yourself."

"You're no such thing!"

"Now stop apple-polishing and get along with you. Good night."

Alice waved goodbye as Miss Bruce headed the Nash down the rough dirt path to the main road a few hundred yards beyond the house. Then she hurried to the studio-barn, unlocked the door and turned on the light. She sat down on a stool and began to read the monograph.

The author, a Kurt Freistag, was unknown to her. The publisher's imprint read, "*Hans Veit und Sohnen, Leipzig*, 1964." It was a booklet of forty-eight pages, handsomely printed on enamel stock, with about fifty black-and-white photographs and a dozen others in full color, including the superb Majolica pieces she had already seen in Miss

Bruce's book. The author's foreword and discussion of Heinrich Müller's career took ten pages, and she could recognize only a word here and there. But on the last page of the text, there appeared the photograph of the chateau at Varlier where, from what she could gather, her father had done some of his finest work. It was of brownstone, a many-gabled three-sectional structure, with a sharply upright narrow middle from whose top a wide, old-fashioned chimney stack lofted towards the sky. Facing the chateau was a huge gnarled tree—peculiarly like the one near her uncle's farmhouse. To the left of the house were many shrubs, while on the opposite side were clumps of small trees. The chateau was built on a knoll, and below it spread a bleak, sparsely grassed plain. At the left foreground of the photograph, Alice saw what appeared to be the ruins of a building that had been razed, but whose vaulted archways rose a few feet above the ground, as if it had been built well underground centuries before. The top surface of this substructure ran like a winding road across the plain and up towards the chateau.

It was strange that her uncle had never mentioned the chateau. And if her father had lived and worked there during the last years of his life, how could he have been a Nazi, even granting that Paris was occupied by the Germans till the end of the war? There were so many things she wanted to know now, yet who could give her the answers? Her uncle, if he knew, obviously did not wish to say any more than he had already said. But why was that? What secret concerning her father did he still keep from her?

Now, for the first time, she wanted to know everything there was to know about Heinrich Müller. For vaguely she felt that all of it, however remote, however buried in the past, concerned her, touched her in some mysterious way. Perhaps, subconsciously, that was why she had been

content to remain aloof so many years from the people of the small town where she had spent virtually all her life . . . because she had not felt herself an integral part of that community; or could not, as long as there was any vital link between her and the past.

Twelve

Alice read every line of the monograph, even though she did not understand it. For this was the first tangible evidence of her father's existence. Till now, he had been a faceless wraith, identified only by words spoken years after his death, and she had had to accept the speaker's interpretation as gospel. Yet in the monograph, there was a picture of her father, and the caption under it was within her translative powers; it had been taken when he was thirty. He was then black-haired, with high forehead, widely spaced large clear eyes, a frank mouth and firm, deeply cleft chin. He seemed to be almost six feet tall, athletically trim and fit. Staring at his picture, she could see no sign of guile; there was a sensitivity to the cast of his features, a gentleness to his eyes, which made her wonder how such an individual, with an artist's perceptivity, could affiliate himself in any way with the Nazi cause.

Yet that intuitive feeling was, she knew, not at all logical. She had read that the criminologist Lombroso had, late in the nineteenth century, developed a theory that a criminal could be detected by a study of the art of physiognomy which predicated that certain facial traits were invariably found in the faces of social malefactors. She

knew that this was no more sound than her own innate belief that her father could not have endorsed the Nazi doctrines because his face was that of a poet, an intellectual, a visionary.

She put the monograph on the shelf where her four contest pieces had stood, and went slowly back into the house. The moon was hazy, and the air smelled of oncoming rain. August would be a humid, sultry month in Murganville, as it always was. Now that her work was done, a restlessness seemed to take hold of her, making her dissatisfied with the bucolic serenity of the house, making her aware of how few real friends she had. There was Miss Bruce, of course. Her favorite grammar-school teacher, old Mrs. Davies, had died last summer. There was really no one else. Certainly there was no young man for whom she had the slightest interest, even though Aunt Greta had more than once hinted that she ought to make friends with "that nice Rickie Glogau." They had said hello several times the past year or two, and Alice was not especially desirous of deepening that acquaintance. There was no really common basis on which she and Rickie could start any kind of meaningful friendship, and she surely was not interested in him as a potential husband.

The fact was, she had never really thought much about that status which is held to be woman's ultimate goal. Miss Bruce was right; she had devoted so much of her time and interest to her craft, to working with clay, to molding it into forms that delighted the esthetic senses, that she had been virtually oblivious to people. There was no doubt that the European trip would be a refreshing and stimulating experience, perhaps draw her out of her introspective little world. If she won . . .

But she had learned humility along with her skill, and she did not flatter herself beyond her just dues. There were surely so many fine young artists throughout the

country who would have heard about the competition and entered it. It would be presumptuous for her to think that she would emerge the winner, no matter how highly Miss Bruce rated her abilities. It was satisfaction enough at the moment to know that she had done the very best work she knew how; it was now beyond her powers to effect a decision. The judges would unpack and look at all the pieces submitted. They would not hear Miss Bruce's glowing praise of a gifted pupil, not know that the initials "AM" imitated Heinrich Müller's, nor was there any reason they should. They would stand her set off by itself and study it with cool, dispassionate eyes and mark down their findings. They might think her choice of white glaze with black trim entirely too ingenuous; others might find fault with her spout, or the lid for the sugar bowl. The art of communication is universal, yes, but each person finds something different to appreciate or deplore in a given creative piece, whether it be music or weaving or sculpture or portraiture. And these incalculable factors that motivate critical judgment would be at play during the time these unknown, influential arbiters of art voted on her set. It was as well not to get her hopes too high, for then the disappointment would be the greater.

And so for the next week she tried to be as companionable as she could towards her aunt and uncle. She went out of her way to do little chores for Aunt Greta, to help her prepare the meals, to dust and sweep. She was more than usually congenial towards Uncle Otto, bringing him his cigar humidor after supper and lighting the strong dark Havanas he enjoyed, asking if he wanted his slippers and the newspaper when evening latened.

But even as she made these simple gestures towards a warmer family balance, she was conscious of the pretense behind them. Despite her gratitude to Otto Miller for the lavish gift of the studio-barn and all its professional equip-

ment, she was aware of a subtle rift that was steadily growing between them. It was as if both of them had discovered variables in each other and had decided to be warier in human contact. For his part, he was pleasant as he had always been; he did not again refer to the monograph, nor did he mention the possibility of her going to Europe. For that matter, he did not once ask her about the competition or her feelings as to its outcome. There was a guarded reserve in his attitude towards her, and at the table he would eye his wife when the latter was speaking, ready to reprove her for the slightest trace of a German word that would sometimes slip into her conversation, especially when she grew enthusiastically voluble. And thus Alice had the uncanny feeling that all three of them were like actors on a stage, speaking lines, calculating the effects of those lines, without actually feeling deeply about what they were saying. She could not dislodge that feeling, no matter how affable her uncle was, no matter how solicitous her aunt tried to be.

Miss Bruce did not visit the house that week, and Alice's loneliness intensified. She had never taken a real vacation. She felt the need for one now, even if she didn't win the competition. Yet the idea of asking her uncle for money for it was unthinkable. Up to now, she had never really given much thought to her status in the house; as his niece, she had had education, board, food, clothing, the gift of the pottery equipment, all provided as if she were his own daughter. Within another year, she would be legally of age in this state. And she hoped to earn her own living by that time, if possible. For if he felt such hostility towards her father, his own brother, how could he help from harboring some secret anger towards her, who must remind him every time he looked at her of the brother he so detested?

The inactivity of the past week made her restless, too. When she had been in the studio-barn, conceiving the

pattern for her set and formulating it through every careful step until she could draw the finished pieces out of the kiln, her mind had been completely absorbed in the problems confronting her. But they were not emotional problems; they were the kind that demanded the fiercest concentration, the strongest self-discipline to detail, the unwavering pursuit of a lofty ideal that would be tangibly rendered into permanent form and stand as indisputable proof of her skill or lack of it. Now, with her hands idle and her brain fallow, alone so much of the time and having only her aunt and uncle as companions, she felt an emptiness akin to the moment when she had shipped the crate off at the REA office in West Frankfort. What was next? If she failed to win, would her life go on with college and an occasional creative piece and the limited though generous collaboration with Miss Bruce? She had the sudden feeling of belonging to no one and responsible only to herself. It was an uneasy feeling, one that could lead to despondency and to the very brooding of which Miss Bruce had accused her.

And now it was worst of all because for the first time she was almost feverishly determined to learn more about that black-haired man with the sensitive features and the breathtaking color photos of the pottery he had thrown on the wheel and left as a monument to his creative gifts, a monument tarnished by the shadows which Otto Miller had summoned up, like a conjuror who casts a haunting spell so the audience cannot know which is reality and which is illusion. It was Otto Miller, her uncle, who had made the shadow of the hated swastika loom over her father's name and every piece of his work that modern critics now acclaimed. For when she had looked at the photos in the monograph, she had been horrified to discover that these beautiful shapes and glazes and forms darkened before her steady gaze, and superimposed upon them was that perverted cross.

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Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

But was it true? All she knew were the words her uncle had used. What was the proof of those words? Would she ever know it? She stood in front of her window on the second floor of the old Murgan house, looking out at the gnarled old tree that had survived the lightning bolt. Its forked branches seemed to be dark spectral arms reaching out towards the house. The night was dark, and again the moon had a hazy ring about it. Outside and just below her window, the balcony rail loomed its seemingly unending pattern. Below and to her left, she could see the slanting, broad-shingled low roof over the old stone shed which had been built as an adjunct to the Murgan house and where Herman Murgan had undoubtedly kept his milk and cream for cooling in the days before electrical refrigeration was known. Now it was rarely used, except as a storage for farm tools. It was large and windowless, and the four stone columns in front of it which supported the low roof made it a kind of porch, welcome in the oppressive summer heat.

She opened her window to let in some air, but there was hardly a gust stirring. The stillness around the old house was somehow as oppressive as the heat had been during the day, and more so because of the darkness and the eerie vigilance of the sentinel-like old tree beyond it. Indeed, it was strange that tonight she could not hear even the faintest chirping of a cricket.

Her aunt and uncle slept on the first floor, in the huge master bedroom which old Herman Murgan had designed in the hope that it would engender a family dynasty. The lights were out downstairs, and the house was silent. Only her own light burned. She stared out at the lightning-warped tree and shivered. The memory of the photo of her father's chateau returned, and with it that similar tree to the left of the building. Yet its branches seemed freer and longer. When the sun went down, they could cast longer shadows. Who lived in that faraway

chateau now? What secrets did its rooms and walls hold for her? Would she ever learn them?

She continued staring at the tree outside the house, as if by force of will she could wish herself across the Atlantic and inside that chateau where her father had lived. And her mother, too, she was sure. Had they had servants who loved them and respected her father's genius? Or had they been liveried puppets, executing orders and thinking nothing of the master and mistress who engaged them? What had her mother been like—she knew even less about her than about Heinrich Müller.

But in the stillness, there was no fantasy, only the reality of this lonely house far from the edge of the small town which was her only known boundary. There was only the twisted tree outside her window, bleak, foreboding, stark in the patch of faint moonlight that tinged it with weirdly dappled luster, making its dark, gnarled branches seem the more grotesque.

With a sigh she turned back to her bed, turned out the lamp standing near it, and lay down, closing her eyes, forcing her mind to relax and to give up its tenacious groping towards that remote, intangible shadow of the past. . . .

She was awake and not awake. She was conscious of movement, of walking. She was walking over a barren, sparsely grassed plain, following a curious, narrow winding stone path that ran along the top of dark vaulted archways half hidden in the ground, so that the surface of what was left of the razed building seemed to form part of the ascending plain towards a distant knoll. A knoll on which stood a brownstone building, divided sharply in the middle by a tall upright structure which connected with it and yet seemed a separation, and atop which rose a large chimney. But no smoke emerged. In the purplish haze of dusk the chateau was silhouetted, and she walked

towards it. To her left was a barren tree, with wide, spreading, twisted branches. . . .

The door of her room opened. A face peered in cautiously, a hand grasping the doorknob from the outside. For a long moment the face hovered, watching, waiting. Then quickly the shadowy figure moved into the room, towards her dresser. Atop it lay a gold chain to which a little shiny key was affixed. The hand reached to it, lifted chain and key silently. Swiftly, noiselessly, the figure turned and was gone. The door closed very slowly, the knob turning inch by inch till the catch clicked. Then once again, there was silence.

Alice did not stir. Her face was tense. In her dream, she was walking towards the distant chateau, and yet with each step she took upon the sloping plain, the knoll seemed farther than before. The chateau began to recede, turning into nebulous fog, then disappearing. And where it had stood, there was nothing. Only the tree that reached out to where a brownstone building had once stood, proudly alone upon that broad mound to which the barren plain gave access. . . .

Aunt Greta set oatmeal, toast and coffee before Alice at the kitchen table. "Did you sleep well, dear?"

"Oh yes, Aunt Greta. I feel very refreshed. Didn't it rain? The haze around the moon made me sure it would rain before morning."

"No. It's very hot outside. And the radio says rain won't come for another twenty-four hours. We could stand more rain for the crops, your uncle says."

"I know. I think I'll go to the studio and do some work, Aunt Greta—unless you need me."

"Oh, no, dear, it is always very easy taking care of your uncle. He asks for so little, Otto does." Greta Miller beamed. "Do whatever you wish, Alice *Liebchen*. Oh—there I go forgetting again—he does not like me to use even a single German word."

"Aunt Greta—tell me something."

"What, my dear?"

"Was it romantic, how you and Uncle Otto met?"

For a moment, Greta Miller's lips curved in a reminiscent, almost fatuous smile. Then her large blue eyes shadowed and her face grew impassive. "Oh, not so much, really, child. I came in one day to the shop. We talked. Then he asked me to go our with him—that is really all, you see. Why do you ask, dear?"

"I—I suppose because you're the only parents I really have, Aunt Greta. I don't even know anything about my mother."

"She was . . . very beautiful. Like a princess, truly. But then you saw her picture, didn't you?"

Alice nodded, watching her aunt's face. Yet the earlier enthusiasm with which Aunt Greta had spoken of her affection for Otto Miller was now replaced by a placid matter-of-factness. If anything, her aunt's eyes were wary.

"You have her eyes and her mouth. She came from a fine family, I can tell you. One of the oldest in Germany. She wrote poetry and she made charming sketches in pen and ink and in water-color. She met your father at one of the art shows at which his work won a prize. They fell in love. What a tragic thing that she died when you were born—and yet—"

Greta Miller fell silent as Uncle Otto walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Alice." His tone was formal, his face bland.

"Good morning, Uncle Otto. I was just telling Aunt Greta I think I'll go to the studio and work on some pieces, just to keep busy. She says there isn't anything for me to do here right now."

"Very well." He seemed to be ruminating over her words, for he stood, hands behind his back, lips pursed.

Then he said, "When will you know about the contest, Alice?"

"It's supposed to be decided by the fifteenth of August, Uncle Otto."

"I see. Is there only one prize?"

"No, not really. They're giving $500 as the second prize and $250 as the third, and the ten best entries will be exhibited at the museum for six weeks."

"Then there would be a consolation if you did not win first prize."

"Yes, I guess so. If the judges thought my work was that good. But I hadn't really thought about anything else except winning."

"The trip to Europe means so much to you, then?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to say exactly why it meant so much, but instinct prompted her to reply instead, "Miss Bruce taught me to aim high, Uncle Otto. This way, I'll know for sure right away whether my ability really qualifies me. Oh, yes, the trip would be fun. Especially since I've never been away from Murganville."

"That is true. It is my fault, too. But Aunt Greta and I have been happy here, and after being uprooted as we were, one looks for security when he gets older. You will learn that too, Alice."

"I suppose I will."

"If you do win, though, have you thought yet where you would go? The money is to be spent as you please, so long as you visit an important art center, is that not true?"

"That's right, Uncle Otto. Well, Paris, of course, for the Louvre. And I suppose after all I've read about that fascinating city, I'd like to see its landmarks, like Notre Dame Cathedral and Montmartre and the Eiffel Tower."

"Of course. Well, I must get out to the fields. The men we have working on the farm these days are shiftless. It is not like the good old days, when we could make them

bear their responsibility. Now all they want is wages and meals and to see how they can loaf when my back is turned. I will see you at supper, then, Alice."

"Yes, Uncle Otto. Oh, Aunt Greta—don't fix anything special for lunch. I'll come back in and make some sandwiches and iced tea. It's going to be awfully warm today."

Alice took the little gold chain off her neck and unlocked the door of the studio-barn. The spaciousness of the place had always delighted her; she did not feel quite so alone as she would have in a narrow room. Perhaps she ought to go to dig for more clay; no, there was still enough left in the plastic bags. What she had been drying the day Matt Harshaw had hidden in the shack had already been brought into the studio-barn and stored away.

She walked slowly to the wheel. What should she try to throw today, a bowl or a decorative flowerpot for Aunt Greta? That would please her aunt. And Aunt Greta had been especially nice to her of late. That remark about her mother this morning. How strange that Aunt Greta seemed so edgy whenever she was talking about the past, afraid that Uncle Otto might come in at any moment. Was there something Aunt Greta knew which she wanted to tell, yet didn't dare to?

It would be a change for her to try majolica today, Alice thought. The technique of making this ware had come from Spain, though the style had mainly been developed in Italy and then spread to the Netherlands. The body of majolica ware was buff-colored, then covered with a lead glaze containing tin. Transparent glaze becomes opaque when tin oxide is added; each of the fine particles of tin oxide is enveloped in a coat of glaze, with the effect that a colorless glaze becomes white and a colored glaze opaque in a slightly lighter color. The particular charm of majolica lies in the quick, deft brushwork of painting on the glaze, which demands sureness of

touch and imaginative artistry. After the decoration is painted on, the piece is completely dried and then a transparent glaze applied over the design.

She would study the photos of her father's work in majolica. There was a delicacy to his brushwork which was inimitable. But at least she could attempt the technique to test her own deftness and inventiveness. She walked to the drying shelf where she had put the monograph.

But to her astonishment, it was gone. Could she have referred to it again and then laid it down somewhere else? She searched the studio-barn, and after half an hour gave up the search. But where could it be? No one else had a key to the studio-barn, and she hadn't brought the monograph into the house.

It was exasperating. She never misplaced things. And yet there was no other explanation. There was no point in asking her aunt or uncle; she had never intended to show it to them, least of all to her uncle.

She stood, undecided, baffled, distressed by the loss; it was the only tangible memento of her father that she possessed. She remembered the publisher's name; perhaps she could write to ask for another copy.

But there was one thing she remembered about the monograph: the picture of the chateau at Varlier. She could still see it in her mind's eye—as she had seen it in that all-too-realistic dream last night. The tree at the left, and the three-sectioned building, with its large rectangular chimney rising highest of all above the gables. And the ruined, half-subterranean building which made a pathway along the bleak plain towards the knoll on which the chateau perched.

She would take clay and mold a wide plate, and on it, using the technique of majolica, she would paint the chateau and the trees, and the vaulted archways of the old building in the foreground. And years later, the fired,

glazed plate could hang in her own house and she could look at it and say, "That was where my father and mother lived." And she would have at least one tangible link of having belonged, of having been a part—perhaps the happiest part—of the now forgotten past.

Thirteen

Besides the majolica plate, Alice made a rectangular blue flowerpot with children's laughing faces, the latter being a gift for her aunt. On the morning of Friday, August 13, the two pieces were ready. Alice hid away the plate, wrapping it in newspaper and putting it in a wooden box near the potter's wheel. She kept calipers and various little tools for decorating and shaping clay in the box, and strewed these over the newspaper-wrapped plate.

Aunt Greta was enchanted with the gift, and made much of it, placing it on the kitchen windowsill. She promised to plant nasturtiums, her favorite flowers; and as a special treat to thank Alice for her thoughtfulness, she baked an old-fashioned chocolate cake with white dough and rich, thick chocolate frosting.

After having a modest lunch of a sandwich and iced tea, Alice went back to the studio-barn. Uncle Otto was out in the cornfields with his three workers, busy shucking corn and inspecting the crop of soy beans, some of which had been damaged by the torrential rain that had fallen two days before.

Once again she took the majolica plate out of the news-

paper wrapping and stared at it, memorizing its detail, trying to compare it with the mental portrait of the chateau which she had remembered from the monograph. Yes, it was all there, as faithfully as her glazed colors could portray it; the dark tree with its wide, reaching branches, the brownstoned, many-gabled house and the tall middle section, the plain and the half-concealed archways of the ancient building.

Would it still be standing twenty years after the war? Would there be another owner, and would he know anything of her father? There were so many things she wanted to know. But who could tell them all to her now? It was foolish, really, to put so much hope in the past; perhaps, if she found out the truth, if she ever did, she would be sorry she ever went looking for it. Yet she knew now that she would take that chance, if there were the slightest possibility of learning how her father had lived and in what he had believed.

There was a sudden knock at the door. Hastily Alice rewrapped the plate and thrust it down into the bottom of the wooden box, piling the ceramic tools over it. "Just a minute," she called.

"It's Aunt Greta," came from the other side of the studio-barn door. "I didn't want to disturb you, *Liebchen*, but there is the telephone for you. It is from New York."

"I'll be right there," Alice called. She drew the bolt—hitherto she had never bothered to lock herself in from the inside, till the loss of the monograph—and walked quickly to the house, Aunt Greta at her side.

"*Ach*, do you think it is news about the contest?"

"Maybe. It must be. I don't know anybody in New York."

"Oh, I do so hope it's good news, for your sake, *mein Kind*."

Alice was out of breath when she picked up the phone

in the hallway just off the dining room. "Hello?" she faltered.

"Is this Miss Alice Miller?" the long-distance operator asked.

"Yes, this is she."

"One moment, please. Go ahead, please." The operator left the line, and Alice repeated, "Hello?"

A man's voice responded. "Miss Alice Miller? This is Henry Duffield, assistant curator of ceramics at the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art in New York."

"Yes, Mr. Duffield."

"Officially, the decision on our ceramics competition won't be announced till Sunday the fifteenth, Miss Miller, but, since the judges' decision was unanimous, I thought I'd call you now and let you know the good news. You've been awarded first prize."

"Oh! You—you're sure?"

Henry Duffield had a pleasantly resonant voice, and his laugh was genially sympathetic. "Quite sure, Miss Miller. Your coffee service is a magnificent achievement. All of the judges thought so. You'll have official confirmation when we send you a registered airmail letter on Monday. Will you be able to come to New York to accept your prize?"

"Yes—I—I think so."

"Good. We'd like to arrange for newspaper publicity and a feature story in *American Crafts Monthly*. Would you let us know when you're coming, then?"

"Of course, Mr. Duffield. I—I can't believe it yet—"

"It's true enough, Miss Miller. Oh, one more thing. We asked all entrants to send us a photograph suitable for reproduction. You did, of course, and we'd like your permission to use it for a New York newspaper story—have you any objection?"

"Not at all. I—I'm very flattered. I can't tell you what

this means to me, Mr. Duffield. I . . . I'm so very grateful to all the judges and to you."

"I wish I could take some of that credit, but in this instance, Miss Miller, I'm only the liaison man for the museum," Henry Duffield chuckled. "But you'll meet the judges when you come to New York. One more thing—you submitted a short biography, but there really isn't very much of it."

"I—I'm afraid I haven't led a very exciting life, Mr. Duffield. I've lived in Murganville all my life, you see."

"Is there anything more you'd like to tell me about yourself for the newspaper story, Miss Miller?"

Alice saw her aunt watching, hands clasped, a look of excited expectancy on her plump flushed face. She took a deep breath and then she said, "Well, you could say that my father was Heinrich Müller, the great German ceramist. It's the truth, Mr. Duffield."

"Well, I say now! That's quite a story in itself, Miss Miller! No wonder you show such gifts of expression. Your father is regarded as one of the greatest potters of our century. A pity he had to die just at the end of the war."

"I . . . I was brought here by my uncle and aunt when I was only a few months old, so I never knew him, Mr. Duffield. Maybe—maybe you can tell me more about him."

"Well, actually, Miss Miller, we have the German monograph in our library—I'm sure you've seen it?"

"Oh, yes, I—I'm familiar with it, Mr. Duffield."

"Most of what we know about him is in that work, Miss Miller. But we do have several of his finest pieces, as it happens. They were donated to us several years ago by a former European journalist who had been a good friend of Heinrich Müller's and who knew him rather well, as I recall. Apparently Müller had been commissioned by this man to do some pieces for his home."

"This—this journalist—do you happen to know his name?" Alice asked, her voice unsteady.

"Let me see—oh, yes, his name was Pierre Laborde. I believe he's living here in New York City. I'm sure when he reads the story of your winning our competition he'll look forward to meeting you. When do you think you could be here in New York, Miss Miller?"

"I—I don't know right now, Mr. Duffield. Maybe by the end of next week—or would that be too late?"

"Oh, no. Of course, the Museum would like to have a press conference when you arrive and to arrange for a display of your work, and then there'll be the presentation of the first-prize check by Mr. Dudley, who, as you know, is our curator in ceramics. He's quite anxious to meet you. He, by the way, was one of the judges."

"That's a very great honor. I admire his work so very much, Mr. Duffield."

"Well, he certainly admires yours. Thank you so much, Miss Miller. And would you wire us when your plans for coming to New York are complete, so we can make the necessary publicity arrangements?"

"Yes, certainly, Mr. Duffield. And—and I want to thank you and everybody else who had anything to do with the competition. I—I'm very grateful."

"So are we that you entered, Miss Miller. Mr. Dudley is quite happy that the competition produced such an outstanding contribution to modern creative pottery, I can assure you. Well, goodbye. And don't forget to wire us."

"I won't, and again, thank you so very much, Mr. Duffield. Goodbye."

Alice hung up the phone and turned to her aunt. Her face was radiant as she exclaimed, "Such wonderful news—I've won, Aunt Greta!"

"*Liebchen,* I'm so glad for you! Then you go to New York?"

Alice nodded. *But I'll need money to get there, she thought. I shan't get the check till I'm there. I'll have to borrow it—but not from Uncle Otto. I'm beholden to him enough already. Maybe Miss Bruce will lend me the money. I'll call her and ask her to come over right now.*

"I still can't believe it—it's like a dream, Aunt Greta."

"Yes, a dream. And you have told them that Heinrich Müller was your father, *nicht wahr?*"

"Well, Mr. Duffield asked me about myself—you see, I'd mailed in a photograph and a little biographical sketch, which every contestant had to do. So I told him, as you heard. Why? Shouldn't I have said that, Aunt Greta?"

Greta Miller's face was expressionless now. "Perhaps there was no harm in it."

"No harm?" Alice echoed. "But what possible harm could there be? It's the truth, isn't it? He was my father, and he was a great ceramist, and now I've proved that I have some of his skill. I'm glad, Aunt Greta. I know that Uncle Otto and you have never really told me very much about either my father or my mother. I suppose that was to protect me. But from what? I've grown up here all my life, and I love you both, and I'm grateful for the kindness you both have always shown me. And now that I've done something on my own, I'm not going to hide the fact that Heinrich Müller was my father."

"You must do what you think right, *mein Kind*." Greta Miller's voice was noncommittal. "But sometimes it is better to let the past remain dead and forgotten. To stir it up after all these years will not make you happier, Alice. Yes, it is right and natural that you should want to know about your parents. There is nothing, really, to know about your mother—she was beautiful and young and she loved your father, and it was the dear God's will that she died giving you life. And she knew nothing of your father's actions—no, I have said too much already. Don't ask me, Alice dear. Your uncle has forbidden me

to speak of Heinrich Müller. Surely you must know that."

"Yes, and he's told me how he feels, too. And all these years I've accepted it and said nothing, and worried over the thought that my father, artist though he was, belonged to those barbarians who murdered and tortured and lied and betrayed in the name of their country and their politics. And I've wondered sometimes if I might be tainted the same way, descending from him, if that was true."

"Oh, no, child, no," Greta Miller said quickly, a hand at her mouth, her blue eyes wide with shadowed anguish, "you could not be. You were a tiny baby when we brought you here, and Otto made me speak English always so that you would grow up knowing only this little town where we began our new life. All of it was for you, Liebchen. I wanted you to have everything. Because, you see, I—I—" Her face turned red, and her eyes lowered. "I could never give your uncle a child. So you were my child."

"Oh, Aunt Greta, I didn't know!" Alice's voice choked; swiftly she went to the stout gray-haired matron and hugged and kissed her.

"That is why you are so dear to me, Alice. That is why, since your uncle and I have turned our backs on the past, we wish you to be happy, to find your career and to have a good rich life, without thinking back to what is best forgotten. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. But I can't explain why, for the first time, I need to know what my real parents were really like. It's not that I haven't been happy here with you and Uncle Otto looking after me. And I'm very flattered that you've considered me as if I were your own, Aunt Greta."

"But you will go on wondering about him. I cannot stop you, Alice. I pray God you will not be unhappy if,

some day, all your questions are answered. But I do no think they can be."

Her voice was dull now, and she spoke with a finality that foreclosed any challenge. Alice had the curious pre sentiment that her aunt could tell her much that sh yearned to know, yet would not.

"I'm going to call Miss Bruce now, Aunt Greta, an tell her the good news."

"She will be proud of you too, *Liebchen.* So now i is all arranged, *nicht wahr?* Have you decided where yo will go in Europe when you get the money?"

"No, Aunt Greta. Up until the phone rang, I wasn' even thinking that I might be lucky enough to win There's time to decide when I get to New York."

"You will need money to get there, *ist das nich richtig?* Let me lend it to you."

"Oh, no, Aunt Greta. I couldn't take it. You and Uncl Otto have done too much for me already. And anyway," Alice gave an airy little laugh, "I'm rich now in my own right . . . just think, two thousand dollars! There' enough there to pay my way to New York."

"Yes, indeed there is, *mein Kind.* I think, too, yo should tell the newspaper editor in this town, Mr. Lom bard, that you have won such an important contest. The all the people of Murganville will know what a cleve niece Uncle Otto and I have."

"If you want me to, I can call him."

"You must make sure he prints something about you uncle, that he is *Burgomeister*—mayor. Uncle Otto wil like that." Greta Miller's face expressed a solemn prid now.

"Of course I will, Aunt Greta."

"But *bitte,* I ask you—this time, do not tell Mr. Lom bard that you are the daughter of Heinrich Müller. They know us here as Miller. Your uncle would not want any one to think he was not a good American citizen."

"I won't tell Mr. Lombard about my father, Aunt Greta. I promise. Now I'll go call Miss Bruce first, and then the newspaper."

Alice gave her aunt a kiss and then walked out to the hallway telephone. Aunt Greta's last words lingered in her mind, like the jarring overtones of discordant notes carelessly struck on the piano.

Why, if Uncle Otto had lived in Murganville twenty years and been mayor the past six, could anyone doubt that he was an American citizen? Even if he were the brother of a Nazi, hadn't he been cleared by the authorities when he came to this country? Why, twenty years later, should Aunt Greta worry that anyone might doubt his right to citizenship?

As she lifted the receiver off the hook to call Miss Bruce, Alice knew how she would spend the money she had just won. She would go to Paris. It was surely one of Europe's greatest art centers, and her choice would fulfill the conditions stipulated in the rules of entry.

But the chateau at Varlier, fifty miles to the north of Paris, would be part of her itinerary. She would tell no one, not even Miss Bruce, that she was determined to find that winding road leading over the plain up to the knoll, the road she had trodden in her dream. This time she would walk it in reality to learn what secrets the past would surrender.

Fourteen

Miss Bruce held out both her hands to Alice, her homely face glowing with pleasure. "I came as soon as I could Alice dear! I'm so happy for you!"

"I still can't believe it, Miss Bruce. But wasn't it nice of that Mr. Duffield to phone me before the official announcement was made? He says I'm to get a registered airmail letter notifying me that I've won."

"Wonderful! And you're going to New York and get the money, and then you'll go to Europe, won't you Alice? And you mustn't worry about being late for college. This is so much more important for you."

"Yes, I'm going, Miss Bruce, I want very much to go —but didn't you say you'd go with me?"

Miss Bruce shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't. This time, Amy's usual complaints have some foundation. She's down with a very bad attack of neuritis, and I must stay home and look after her. I do wish I could go with you and show you some of the attractions a tourist never sees . . . the picturesque Norbardier district to the east of Paris, the little restaurants that aren't mentioned in the guides but where you can get simply incomparable food

And the art shops in Montmartre." Miss Bruce uttered a rueful sigh. "But it just can't be this year, I'm afraid. Of course I'm assuming you'll choose Paris as your main stopping-off place?"

"Yes. I'm not sure what else, but Paris for sure. I—I wanted to ask a favor of you, Miss Bruce—if you won't think me too presumptuous."

"You know better than that, my dear. What is it?"

"They want me to come to New York and get the check. They're going to have publicity about it, you see—"

"Trust old John Dudley for that," Miss Bruce chuckled. "Well, when you get there, you just tell them that I was your teacher. If anyone's going to get any credit for helping develop your God-given talents, I want it to be myself, not that laurel-stealing old goat."

"Of course I'm going to tell them that I studied with you, Miss Bruce. I couldn't have won at all without your encouragement and all the training you gave me when I started in high school."

"That's very good of you to say, Alice," Miss Bruce's voice was gruff, and she blinked her eyes rapidly to hide the rush of emotion which her favorite pupil's grateful praise had evoked. "Now what was this favor you wanted to ask?"

"I—I don't want to borrow my fare to New York from Uncle Otto. Could you—would you lend it to me, Miss Bruce? I'll mail it back to you as soon as I get the check in New York."

"Of course I will. The very idea! Is that all you wanted to ask me? By rights, I ought to make you a present of it, considering the pleasure it's given me to have taught you and now to see you so successful!"

"Oh no," Alice gasped, "I wouldn't think of accepting it! It's just a loan, please, Miss Bruce."

"As you like, my dear. When do you plan on leaving?"

"Thursday, I think. I'll fly there from Chicago—that's the fastest way."

"Fine. If Amy improves, maybe I can drive you there by then. But why not go Monday?"

"I want to help Aunt Greta with some of the chores. She hasn't been looking too well lately. And after all, I'll probably be gone for a whole month."

"It's high time you started thinking more about yourself, in my opinion. But if that's the way you've planned it, I won't try to change your mind. I'll come over Wednesday with the money, then, Alice dear. Maybe by then I'll know if I can take you to Chicago. Otherwise, I could drive you to West Frankfort to get the train there."

"I'm very grateful to you, Miss Bruce."

"It's mutual, dear." Miss Bruce impulsively leaned forward and kissed Alice on the cheek. "You've made an old teacher very proud and very happy. I'll run along back to Amy now. And you'll be hearing from me Wednesday. If you change your mind and decide to go earlier, just phone me."

"No, I'm pretty sure it'll be Thursday, Miss Bruce. I'll phone Chicago today to get a plane reservation for early evening. Then all the next week I can make arrangements for my trip to Paris."

"You'd better ask the museum people to rush through your passport, my dear, or you might have to spend an extra week besides. I'm sure they can do that for you readily enough. And you'll have to get your shots, too, before you can leave the country. I'll see you Wednesday, then, Alice."

"Thanks again, Miss Bruce. And my best wishes to Amy."

The eight-page edition of the Murganville *Register*, the town's weekly newspaper, appeared Monday with

the front-page story of Alice Miller's selection as the winning entrant in the national ceramics contest sponsored by the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art. Matthew Lombard, the *Register's* elderly but still spry editor-publisher, found a photo of Alice taken at the time of her high-school graduation to illustrate the story, and a more recent one of Otto Miller, the town's esteemed mayor and Alice's worthy uncle. Alice had told Matthew Lombard only the bare essentials of the contest, but she did not mention her father or her intention of going to Paris.

The *Register* was delivered Tuesday morning in time for breakfast. Alice had spent Monday helping her aunt churn a supply of butter and make some of her uncle's favorite jams and pickle relishes to put away for the winter, and Tuesday was to be devoted to the same chores. As they sat down to breakfast, Otto Miller unfolded the *Register* and chuckled dryly. "I see old Lombard didn't have the brains to come take an up-to-date photo of you, Alice. Still and all, you were quite attractive even back in high school."

"Thank you, Uncle Otto."

"And I see he used a picture of me. Very good. It doesn't do any harm to remind the citizens that Alice Miller's uncle is their mayor. In another two years I will want to run for reelection." He chuckled again and took a sip of coffee. "When do you leave for New York, Alice?"

"I'd thought Thursday, Uncle Otto. I've phoned for a plane reservation for seven that evening. Miss Bruce says maybe she can drive me into Chicago."

He frowned. "You might have asked me, you know. I'd be happy to do it."

"I—I didn't want to impose on you—and Miss Bruce offered. Besides, you're busy with the crops, Uncle Otto."

"Not so busy I can't take time enough to see my niece off in style. But if you've made arrangements with Miss Bruce, let it be as it is. But you'll need money for the plane and your expenses."

Alice bit her lip and flushed as she stammered: "They —they said they'd mail me some money, Uncle Otto. The letter ought to be here sometime this morning."

"Very well. But if you need it, you have only to ask me. I still look after you till next year, you know, when you come of age."

"It—it's very generous of you to offer it, Uncle Otto, but I really shan't need it. Thank you anyway."

She began to eat her breakfast quickly, self-consciously aware that he was eying her. It had been an impulse to tell him that small fib about the money. Surely, he would not have liked her borrowing from Miss Bruce. Yet she felt very strongly about not taking a penny from him.

"So," he said when he had eaten all he wanted. "I go out to the fields to make sure my helpers don't loaf too much. Greta, did you pack a lunch for me to take out there? I don't want to waste time coming back to eat."

"Yes, Otto, it is in the refrigerator. I will get it right now."

He lit a cigar, watching the smoke curl and mount upwards. "You think you will be back in time for college, Alice?"

"I don't know yet, Uncle Otto. It depends how long it takes me to get my passport and the necessary medical shots. And what kind of accommodations I can get coming back—it'll probably be rather crowded then. But I don't plan to spend more than a month."

"That is enough time to spend in Europe. It is not as it was, before the war."

"I suppose that's true. But I'm going to museums and places like that."

"Delft is a fine city to see, if you want to study pottery. They have a museum there, you know. It has a fine collection of Delft ware, which is the Dutch version of majolica."

Her eyes widened. It was the first time he had ever shown any knowledge of her craft. "Yes, I read about that in a book on pottery by a Dutchman named Eppens, Uncle Otto. But I'm interested in design and painting and allied subjects too, you see, so that I can learn to be more creative and to decorate my own ware more skillfully."

He took a puff at his cigar as Greta Miller brought him the paper sack in which she had packed his lunch. "Thank you, Greta. I'll be back in time for supper. Goodbye, Alice. Of course you will go where you want. I was just making a suggestion."

"Maybe, if things work out, I'll get to Delft after all, Uncle Otto."

He nodded stiffly, took the sack and left the house. Alice felt a vague uneasiness at his diffident mood. He had not seemed enthusiastic about her winning the competition, at least not nearly so much as Aunt Greta. But then perhaps she was imagining things. Now that she thought about it, it wasn't so strange he should know about majolica and Delft ware, not if he had run an art shop. It was just her nerves. She was on edge. The vacation trip would do her good. She could hardly wait to leave for New York. Perhaps, if the museum helped expedite matters, she could be in Paris by the end of August.

For the rest of the morning, she helped Aunt Greta with the preserves. When the jars were finished, she carried them out to the old stone cooling room and stood them on a battered table. The registered letter from the museum arrived just before lunch. It was official now, she had really won. She showed Aunt Greta the letter while they had lunch. After lunch she worked another hour

until her aunt, complaining of a headache, went to take a nap. Alice decided she would spend the rest of the afternoon in the studio-barn. It was too bad she hadn't thought of making Miss Bruce a very special bowl or pitcher for a present. If she hadn't been so busy thinking of the coffee service these last few weeks, it surely would have occurred to her. And now there wasn't time —but wait, what about the plate with her father's chateau decorating it? What a perfect gift! And in Miss Bruce's possession, it would be safe. Her uncle and aunt would never see it. Yes, that was the ideal solution. Besides, the museum could probably get her another copy of the monograph on her father. She had looked everywhere for it, even in her own room, but it still hadn't turned up.

She left the house and walked towards the studio-barn. As she started down the path to it, she saw a man get out of Ted Howser's rickety old cab parked out on the narrow dirt road far to her left. Ted worked part of the time for the grocery store and provided what cab service the town needed the rest of the time. But it was strange he would bring out someone this time of day; there were no trains near Murganville. The man must have come from West Frankfort. And now he was walking up towards their house, carrying a briefcase.

She turned and went out through the thick grass to meet him. He was a man of about fifty, she judged, with big horn-rimmed glasses, nearly bald, short and plump, with a bulbous nose and small, almost petulant mouth. He wore a dark suit, and he was obviously uncomfortable in the August heat, for he stopped now to take out a handkerchief and mop his face, then drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders before continuing.

"May I help you?" she called when she was about a dozen feet away.

He looked up, startled, his eyes widening. Then he smiled. "It is you, Miss Miller. I am glad to have found

you. I ought to have called, but I was on my way to the West Coast, and I took the chance of dropping in to see you before you left for New York."

"You know me?"

"But of course, Miss Miller. From your picture in the pottery competition which you have just won. My name is Pierre Laborde."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Duffield of the museum told me about you. Didn't you donate some of my father's pieces to the museum?"

"That is true, Miss Miller. Your father and I were good friends. I used to be art critic for the *Paris Soir*. And when I saw the story and your photo in the New York newspapers Sunday and read that you were Heinrich Müller's daughter, I called Mr. Duffield to ask him when you would come to New York. When he told me you didn't plan to go till the end of this week, and since I have a client I must see on the West Coast before the end of the month, I decided to come out here in the hope I might see you before you left."

"But how did you get to Murganville?"

He chuckled ruefully, mopped his face again. "I flew to Chicago, of course, and then took the train to West Frankfort. As it happened, a man at the depot was coming past Murganville, and he very graciously offered me a lift. *Voila!*"

"You must be terribly hot and tired, Mr. Laborde. Won't you come in and let me get you a nice cold drink? And something to eat?"

"You're very kind, Miss Miller. I would welcome a cold drink right now."

"By all means, come in." Alice opened the door for him. "Take off your coat, too. We've been having scorching weather lately. But then we always do in August. There. Now what would you like, water or buttermilk? Or I could make you some lemonade."

"Buttermilk would be excellent, *merci bien, Mam'selle.*" Pierre Laborde seated himself at the kitchen table and with a contented sigh lay the briefcase on the floor at his feet.

Alice went to the refrigerator, took out the pitcher of buttermilk and poured a tall glass full. She set it down before him, then seated herself across from him, breathless, her heart pounding erratically. At last she was face to face with someone who had known her father . . . and who, she hoped, would speak frankly to her of that knowledge.

Fifteen

"You KNEW my father well, Mr. Laborde?"

The fat bespectacled little man set the empty glass down on the table and smacked his lips. "That was precisely what I needed, *Mam'selle* Miller. Thank you for your kindness. Yes, it is true, I knew Heinrich Müller very well. He was one of the great ceramists of our time, you know."

"I've seen pictures of his pieces in art books. And in the monograph about him that was published by a firm in Leipzig."

"Yes, the *Veit und Sohnen* book. I have a copy, of course. But your father made some pieces for me when I married, at my commission, and I treasured them for years. When my wife died three years ago, I decided to make a gift of them to the museum so that everyone who loves great art could enjoy them as much as we had. I am an art dealer now, you see. I have a shop in New York, and I try to find rare *objets d'art* for some of my clients. That is why I make this trip on to the West Coast after I have visited with you, *Mam'selle* Miller."

"I'm so very glad you did. You see, Mr. Laborde, I

know very little of my father. I was brought to this little town when I was just a baby, and I've lived here all my life."

"With whom are you living, may I ask?"

"My aunt and uncle. Otto Miller was my father's brother. They brought me with them when my father died and when they left Germany."

"Germany?" he echoed. "I wonder if there is not some mistake. The Otto Müller whom I knew was in Paris, with your father. He was an art dealer, too. I met them both while I was writing my art column for the newspaper, *vous savez.*"

"I don't know," Alice said musingly. "Uncle Otto always told me he had a shop in Berlin. But—but tell me about my father, please, Mr. Laborde."

"As much as I can, of course. He was a fine man, a real artist. A gentle man who thought ill of no one. And his beautiful wife—ah, I can see how much you look like her, *Mam'selle* Miller."

"My father died in 1945, I've been told."

"Yes. I was in Paris at the time. I came to the United States two years later with my wife. Her father had died and left her a small inheritance, which we used to open my little shop in New York. I prospered and we both worked hard—till her death."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Laborde."

He made a typically Gallic gesture with his plump, well-manicured hand. "*C'est la vie, et le bon Dieu, Mam'selle.* We had many years of happiness together, and that is what matters most. But I am selfish, talking this way about myself, when it is your father and your mother you want to hear about, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"You're not selfish at all, Mr. Laborde. I can't thank you enough for making that long hard trip just to come to tell me about them."

"It was my pleasure. Mr. Duffield let me see your cof-

fee set before I flew out here. There is no doubt that your great skill, your individuality, comes in some part from your father, *Mam'selle* Miller. Your work, naturally, has a more feminine flair, a delicacy one expects from a woman. But both of you have in common a feeling for flowing lines and curves, a poetry of motion in clay."

Tears blurred her eyes as she answered: "You make me feel very proud of my father."

"And you should be, *Mam'selle* Miller. I met him first in 1940. He was already in Paris then, and he had just married your mother. She was the daughter of a French diplomat who himself was a dabbler in art and something of a *bon vivant*. Your father had bought an old chateau from an impoverished family who once belonged to the aristocracy."

"At Varlier."

"Yes, it was at Varlier. Ah, that's right, you saw the photograph in the Veit monograph, no doubt."

"Yes, I did, Mr. Laborde."

"I met your father just three months before the Germans entered Paris—that was on June 14, 1940, a day of infamy for all free French, for the city had been left undefended. Your father took your mother to the chateau to live so they would not be molested by the Nazi troops. But, of course, German officers billeted where they pleased, and in due course they discovered the chateau and obliged your father to give hospitality to some of the staff officers. They didn't bother him, of course, because he was already famous as a great German artist, though they did ask him why he had left his native land when it needed his strength and talents in wartime."

"Then—then he wasn't a Nazi?"

Pierre Laborde shook his balding head and grimaced with distaste. "No more than you are, *Mam'selle* Miller.

He was proud of his birth, yes, and happy that his work had been recognized, so that it would bring his native country acclaim. But whenever we met, he would tell me how unhappy he was that Germany, the land of Durer and Goethe and Hegel and Schiller, had turned its back on civilization and gone back to the dark ages."

"Oh, thank God! I—I never could believe that the man who designed such exquisite things could be one of those inhuman beasts!"

"But whoever told you that he was, *Mam'selle?*"

She bit her lip. There was no point in telling Pierre Laborde that her uncle had told her, that for all these years she had lived with the agonizing belief that her father's character was flawed.

But even as she sat stunned, trying to cope with the knowledge that her uncle must have lied to her, Pierre Laborde pursued: "Was it your uncle, then, who said that about his own brother?"

"I—I" she began, distraught.

"You need not tell me, *Mam'selle* Miller. I knew your uncle too. He had a shop on the Rue Faubourge, and he visited your father, who had an *atelier* on the Rue St. Vincent, several blocks away. They were not very good friends. For one thing, your uncle was in love with your mother and himself wished to marry her, but she preferred your father."

Alice had the sensation of walking through mists which began gradually to clear, though the path was still uncertain. "I—I wonder if my father's studio would still be there in Paris now, Mr. Laborde?"

"Yes. But it is now a commercial art shop. The fact is, I sometimes have correspondence with the owner, a *M'sieur* Robert Beringer. He and his son Raoul manage it. They are helpful to me finding certain pieces of Louis XVI decor that some of my clients request."

"I plan to go to Paris with the money I've won in that

competition, Mr. Laborde. I'd like to visit the shop . . . perhaps some of my father's things are still there."

"It's most unlikely, *Mam'selle* Miller, after all these years. And actually, your father did most of his work at the chateau. I will give you the address of the old studio, however. It is 17, Rue St. Vincent, not far from the Place de la Concorde. Any taxi in Paris would know how to find it quickly."

"I'll remember that, Mr. Laborde. I'm grateful to you. But do you know anything about the chateau?"

"As it happens, I do, *Mam'selle* Miller. After Heinrich Müller died, the government took it over and then sold it, just when I was leaving to come to this country, to this same Robert Beringer. You see, he knew your father also, as he was the landlord of the property where your father's *atelier* was located. He was—let me see—about forty then, so he must be in his early sixties now, I should say. And his son Raoul would be about thirty-one or thirty-two. Raoul went to a Berlitz school in Switzerland and speaks and writes English as well as if he lived in New York as I do. I think it is old *M'sieur* Beringer's plan to turn the chateau into an art center or museum, though he really kept it for his son in the hope that Raoul would marry and have a family. But so far, Raoul is a bachelor."

"Then it's possible some of my father's pieces and his work tools would still be somewhere in the chateau?"

"Yes, that I think quite possible. One of the rooms, which was originally a library, was used by your father—I myself visited him and your mother there in 1943. And I understand *M'sieur* Beringer has preserved the room intact."

"There's so much I don't know yet, Mr. Laborde—I hardly know where to start or what to ask you next. And I know you're tired from your trip."

At this moment, the kitchen door opened and Greta

Miller, blinking with sleep, stood on the threshold. "I thought I heard voices."

Alice started nervously, then rose from the table, trying to conceal her confusion at the unexpected appearance of her aunt. "It—it's a man from the museum, Aunt Greta." She forced her voice to remain steady and looked at Pierre Laborde intently as she spoke, frantically wanting him to comprehend her and not give himself away. "He—he flew all the way from New York to interview me for—for a publicity release the museum is going to put out." Even as she said those words, she realized how implausible they sounded. But her aunt seemed not to notice anything amiss.

"How do you do, sir?" she inclined her head with a polite smile, then glanced down at the rumpled cotton dress in which she had napped. "You must excuse me that I am not well dressed. I was sleeping."

"But of course, Mrs. Miller. And I didn't mean to disturb you." Pierre Laborde's small, widely spaced brown eyes shifted from her face to Alice's, then back to hers again.

"I—I'd like to show you some of the other things I've done—out in my studio. Would you like to come to see them?" Alice stammered.

Again, her voice, her eyes, were fraught with the appeal to him to accede to her wishes, and again he understood. "But of course. It would be my pleasure, *Mam'selle* Miller." Then, turning to Greta Miller, he bowed with Gallic courtesy. "I trust I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again, Mrs. Miller."

"I'll show you to the studio—it's really a barn, but my uncle converted it," Alice explained, her voice louder than necessary as she opened the door. Pierre Laborde nodded and walked towards her.

When they had gone, Greta Miller stood there for a moment, her face pale, a vacuous expression making her

look still more bovine, her blue eyes frozen with incredulous terror. Slowly she passed a trembling hand over her forehead. Then she said, her voice wavering, "I must tell Otto. But who could have dreamed it?" Lips pursed tightly, her face a secretive mask, she hurried out of the door on the other side of the kitchen, the door that faced the cornfields where her husband was laboring with his three helpers.

"I'm glad you understood, Mr. Laborde. I never expected my aunt to come in while we were talking," Alice said as she unlocked the door of the studio-barn.

"She is your Aunt Greta, I dare say?"

"Yes."

"If my memory is correct, *Mam'selle* Miller, she was a helper in your uncle's shop, a young clerk. And after your father married Diane Coudreaux—that was your mother's maiden name—he turned to your aunt for solace."

"So that is why my uncle hated my father so, because he was disappointed in love," Alice said slowly.

"It may well be a reason. But it does not make sense for your uncle to have told you that your father was a Nazi."

"Mr. Laborde, I'm more and more mystified. What do you know about my uncle, then?"

"I must confess, not very much. Your father did not discuss him with me at any time. I visited your uncle's shop occasionally. He had exquisite things. Some of them, I thought, belonged to famous collections, though at the time I could not recognize them. But he was very prosperous, that I know. Always elegantly dressed. And he didn't mind selling to German officers. Several times I saw them in his shop when I came to call. Officers of high rank, obviously with money and with connoisseur's taste. I do not blame him for that; one must live, and

those of us who stayed in Paris when the Nazis occupied it had little choice. We tried to go on living normally. Others joined the resistance. I myself was not the hero type, I'm afraid, *Mam'selle*. I was only an art critic, and my only weapon was my pen."

"Tell me this, then, if you can. How did my father die?"

"Of poison, *Mam'selle* Miller. I saw him the day before he was found dead in his chateau. In fact, I visited him at the chateau, at his invitation. He was depressed about his young wife's death—you know, of course, that your mother died in childbirth."

Alice nodded, her eyes fixed on his face.

"Yet I do not think he was the kind to commit suicide. I cannot believe he did—yet all I know is the evidence mentioned in the newspapers. He was found dead in the library, which he made into a studio. There was a glass of Moselle wine, half-finished, on the table. The doctor found cyanide in the glass, and that was what killed him. Yet he left no note."

"I—I was only a few months old when it happened . . . do you know what happened after my mother died?"

Pierre Laborde looked surprised. "Why, yes. I thought your aunt had told you. As a gesture of friendship, your uncle sent his clerk Greta over to the chateau to take care of you. She was there at the time of your father's death. Then, very soon after the end of the war in Europe, I heard that your uncle had married Greta Thyron and left Paris. I did not hear of him again until I came here today."

Alice bowed her head and let her tears flow unchecked. She had learned the truth at last—or as much as she might ever know. She knew that her father had done nothing for which she could ever be ashamed. And she

knew that her father and mother had had five years of happiness.

But ominous shadows still hovered about this finally revealed message from the past. Why had her uncle so besmirched her father's character with that false accusation? Why hadn't Aunt Greta ever told her that she had taken charge of her since the day of her birth?

"I—I want to show you something that I designed, Mr. Laborde," she said at last when she had regained her self-control. She walked to the wooden box, moved aside the tools, and took out the newspaper-wrapped plate.

"*Mais c'est épatant, Mam'selle*—it's magnificent!" he gasped.

"Do you recognize the painting?"

"Of course. It's the chateau at Varlier."

"I painted it from memory. I had the monograph about my father, Mr. Laborde, but it was lost. But I remembered what the chateau looked like, and I wanted to have this recollection of it."

"The details are all accurate. And the glaze is beautifully rendered, *Mam'selle* Miller. Decidedly, you will be as great a potter as your father ever was, perhaps even greater."

"It's very good of you to say that. Do you want to meet my uncle, Mr. Laborde?"

"If you do not wish me to, no, *Mam'selle*. I will be frank with you. I could see you were distressed when your aunt came into the kitchen. I myself have nothing to hide. And I do not wish to be the cause of a falling-out between you and your relatives."

"You're very tactful, Mr. Laborde. I—I'm going to Paris. And I'm going to see my father's old studio and then visit the chateau in Varlier. All my life I've wondered about my real parents. Now at least I can go back to the place where they were happy, and my mind will

be at ease, knowing that the artist I so admired wasn't a man I would have to despise."

"Then I am glad I made this trip to see you, *Mam'selle* Miller." He took her hand and kissed it with a profound courtesy that made Alice blush. "And now, it would be a good idea for me to get back to town. That gentleman with the cab might be willing to drive me back to West Frankfort, where I can get the train to Chicago and thence continue my journey to the West Coast by plane."

"Let me call Ted Howser down at the grocery store. He's the only cab driver we have in Murganville, and I'm sure he'll be glad to take you back."

"Thank you, *Mam'selle* Miller. I am very glad I met you. It brings back the happier memories I had of Paris, because you are so much like your mother."

"Thank you again. And for donating my father's pieces to the museum. Mr. Duffield told me about that."

"It was little enough I could do to pay tribute to your father's memory. I am sorry if I have disturbed you by coming here. It was on an impulse—when I saw your picture in the newspaper and read that you were Heinrich Müller's daughter, I had to come." He shook hands with her this time, then waited while she rewrapped the plate and put it back into the box.

She locked the door of the studio-barn and started towards the house. Pierre Laborde followed her, mopping his face again as the hot sun beat down along the path from the barn to the house. "I will get my briefcase, which I left in your kitchen, *Mam'selle* Miller," he said; then with a wry chuckle added, "It was wise in such weather that I did not carry any luggage with me. I will be in Los Angeles just a day, and one can pick up a change of clothes when one arrives."

"Then maybe you'll be back in New York before I

leave, Mr. Laborde, because I'll have to get my passport and the vaccination shots."

"*C'est bien possible, Mam'selle.* I should surely like to have dinner with you in one of New York's fine French restaurants, like *Quo Vadis* or *Les Pyrenees.*"

"That would be lovely. You can reach me at the museum. I don't know where I'll be staying in New York, but I plan to leave this Thursday."

"Let me suggest the Barbizon Plaza, facing Central Park. It is convenient to the museum and the fine restaurants and New York's loveliest shops."

"I'll remember that, and thank you, Mr. Laborde."

Greta Miller was standing outside the kitchen door waiting for them. Pierre Laborde courteously inclined his head and opened the door for her and Alice to enter first.

"Are you going to leave now, Mr. Laborde?" she asked.

Alice's eyes widened; to the best of her knowledge she had not mentioned his name in her aunt's presence.

"You have recognized me, I see," he chuckled softly. "As I recognized you. Yes, *Madame* Miller, I shall go on to Chicago and catch my plane there. I wanted to congratulate your niece on her beautiful entry in the museum contest."

"That was very kind of you, Mr. Laborde."

"Your niece was going to call the man who brought me here, so he could perhaps drive me to West Frankfort."

"I think I can offer you better transportation than that, Mr. Laborde. A friend of my husband's will be glad to drive you directly to Chicago. You can catch your plane with plenty of time to spare and without the bother of taking the train from West Frankfort," Greta Miller proffered.

"But that would be *magnifique!*" Pierre Laborde vis-

ibly brightened. "I must confess the heat does not leave me much energy for an auto ride and then changing to the train. You are sure it will be no trouble? I will gladly pay this friend of your husband's for his time and the petrol."

"You can settle it with him, I'm sure, Mr. Laborde. Shall I call him now?"

"Yes, I think so. It is too bad your husband is not here."

"Otto is very busy in the cornfields. He sends you his greetings. Perhaps another time."

"Yes, perhaps. I'll just wait here then till your friend comes. And maybe I can ask your niece for another glass of that excellent buttermilk?"

"Certainly, Mr. Laborde." Alice smiled and opened the kitchen door. "Do come in and sit down and rest till the car comes, and I'll get you the buttermilk right away."

As she poured him a brimming glass, her aunt went into the hallway to telephone.

"I didn't know she had recognized you, Mr. Laborde," she murmured as she set the glass down before him.

The stout, bespectacled little Frenchman shrugged. "I have not changed so much in twenty years as she has, *Mam'selle* Miller. The fact is, I was nearly bald then and almost as—" he patted his paunch with a wry gesture. "Your aunt was a very attractive woman in those days. But your beauty is of a different kind; it is less of the flesh and more of the spirit. For that reason, it will last longer. And too, you will not have the past to remember now. But it still clings to her."

Alice shivered at the prophetic ring of his words. He began to sip the buttermilk, and then Greta Miller returned. Her face was bland, with even a faint smile on her fleshy mouth, as she announced, "He will be here directly, Mr. Laborde. He has some business to transact

in Chicago, so you will not be taking him out of his way. It is a very convenient arrangement, you see."

"And one for which I'm quite grateful, *Madame* Miller." The little Frenchman lifted his glass in acknowledgment.

Greta Miller moved to the kitchen window and looked out, her back to Alice and Laborde. "You'll have good weather for your journey, Mr. Laborde. It should take about five-and-a-half hours to reach Chicago. Once out of Murganville, you connect with the highway which goes right on into that city."

"*Merci, Madame* Miller." Laborde finished his buttermilk, retrieved his briefcase, and rose. "Again, *Mam'selle,* thank you for seeing me. I count it a privilege to have met you and to have seen your work. I wish you every good fortune."

"I wish you the same, Mr. Laborde," Alice softly replied.

Greta Miller turned to them. "The car has driven up —he's waiting."

"Then I shall say *au revoir, Mam'selle.* Perhaps we shall have that dinner in New York. I'll call for you at the museum when I get back." He took Alice's hand and kissed it, left her standing there, cheeks rosy, eyes glistening with the faint hint of tears.

"Do you see the car, Mr. Laborde? A blue Buick," Greta Miller interposed as she opened the kitchen door for him.

"Your friend's name, that I may thank him properly," Laborde inquired.

"Charles. Charles . . . Harnett," was Greta Miller's answer.

"Then I bid you both goodbye, and thank you for your hospitality. My regards to your husband, *Madame* Miller."

"He is the mayor here, Mr. Laborde. Did you know that?" There was almost a triumphant vehemence in Greta Miller's voice.

"So? I congratulate him. He has done well with his new life. Not everyone is so fortunate. Goodbye, *Madame* Miller. *Au revoir, Mam'selle.*"

He strode through the thick grass out to the dirt road where the blue Buick sedan was parked, motor running. At the wheel sat a young man with closely cropped brown hair. He was tall, and his pale blue eyes had no lashes; his brows had only the thinnest line of hair. His skin was curiously pale, and his mouth was wide and full-lipped. His nose had a classic Roman shape to it, his cheeks were lean and highset. Yet his neck was fleshy and thick.

"*M'sieur* Harnett?"

"That's my name. You the fellow goin' to Chicago?"

"Yes, if you please. I will pay you well. It's good of you to drive me all the way."

"No need to pay me, fellow. It's on Mrs. Miller."

"Oh, that's very generous. But I insist—"

"You can buy me a drink if you want, first time we stop."

"I shall be enchanted," Pierre Laborde smiled as he got into the back seat. . . .

"Pardon me, *M'sieur* Harnett, but unless I am much mistaken, we seem to be driving south. Is Chicago not north?"

"You're real observant, Frenchie. That's right. Chicago's north. I was making for the highway, see?"

"If you say so. I know nothing of these roads."

The young man at the wheel of the Buick smiled. It was a smile without humor, and it revealed perfect white teeth, almost too perfect. Pierre Laborde saw the reflection of that smile in the windshield. He shivered. He had

once seen an SS man bayonet a French prisoner of war with the same inhuman smile on his lips.

They left the dirt road after half an hour of driving, and now the Buick turned off onto an old macadam road badly in need of resurfacing. It was bumpy, and Pierre Laborde was uncomfortably jostled in the back seat.

"Are you sure this is the right way to the highway to Chicago, *M'sieur* Harnett?" he inquired uneasily.

"Uh huh. We'll make a turnoff soon. Then you can buy me that drink you promised."

"Fine, fine. There's no hurry, of course. But this is such a lonely road I can hardly believe it leads to a main highway."

"Leads to the fastest road there is, Frenchie, take it from me."

"I am in your hands, *M'sieur* Harnett."

"Yeah. You are at that, Frenchie. Here we are."

The car stopped over a culvert that crossed a stagnant little creek. The driver got out and opened the rear door. "Out you come, Frenchie."

"But I don't understand—where are we?"

There was nothing visible for miles in any direction. Far to the west, the vague outline of an old windmill stood against the lonely, empty, grassy plain.

Pierre Laborde clutched his briefcase to him and stammered, "I don't understand."

"This is as far as you go. Get out of the car."

"No—you must be insane—I'll pay you, I told her I would—I—no, let go—*mon Dieu, que faites vous—non! aidez-moi! Au secours, au—*"

He cowered back, but the tall young man seized him by a wrist and dragged him out. Then viciously, he smashed his fist into the Frenchman's plump belly, and Pierre Laborde, with a gurgling shriek, sprawled on the narrow road.

The young man bent over him and lifted him, strode down under the stone culvert with his feebly struggling burden, and pitched him into the stagnant creek. Then he waded in, flexing strong, wiry fingers, bent down and seized the spluttering victim by the throat and pushed him under the brackish water till the last of the air-bubbles had disappeared.

Swiftly he walked back to the car, opened the trunk and took out a shovel. He began to dig at the edge of the bank until he had scooped out a deep grave. Wading back into the shallow creek, he lifted up the body of his victim, staggered back to the bank and dumped the body into the grave, which he then swiftly covered up. Finally, tearing up handfuls of weeds and grass, he strewed them over the grave and patted them down along the earth with the flat of the shovel.

Calmly he walked back to the car, tossed the shovel into the rumble seat and closed it. Then he got back into the car, made a U-turn onto the grassy shoulder of the old macadam road, and drove back the way he had come.

Sixteen

"Miss Bruce, I called you early this morning to ask you a very special favor." Alice looked furtively down the hallway. Otto Miller had already gone out to the fields, and Greta Miller was in the kitchen busy with the last of the preserves. It was shortly after nine on Wednesday morning.

"Of course, my dear," her teacher replied. "I was planning to come over to bring you the money you needed for your trip."

"I—I'm very grateful. Miss Bruce—what I wanted to ask was, could you drive me to West Frankfort today instead of tomorrow?"

"Why, yes, I think so, Alice dear. Doctor Pearson says Amy's much better. And I could always ask our nice neighbor, Mrs. Farrell, to stay with Amy till I got back. But I thought you'd made your reservations to fly from Chicago tomorrow?"

"I—I'm going to change them, Miss Bruce. Something has come up. I—I want to leave as soon as I can."

"I understand. You could catch the eleven o'clock train out of West Frankfort and be in Chicago by six this eve-

ning—it's a pity the train makes so many stops, because it's only a 350-mile trip."

"Then I'll take my chances on getting a jet to New York and arriving there tonight—that would be perfect. I—I've already packed, Miss Bruce. I'm taking just one suitcase and wearing my coat." Then, remembering what Pierre Laborde had said, she added, "I can always pick up a change of clothes where I am when I need it."

"I'll call Mrs. Farrell right away, my dear, and then I'll drive right over. Goodbye for now," Miss Bruce said, then hung up.

Alice went back to her room. Her heart was pounding. All yesterday afternoon and evening, she had had a strange impulse to speed her departure for New York. Perhaps it was the news Pierre Laborde had given her about her father. That news had immeasurably lifted her spirits. To be able to believe at last, after all these brooding years, that he had been as upright a man as he had been an artist, was in itself a thankfully accepted anodyne that drove away the pain of doubt and secret grief. Yet at the same time she felt a restless impatience to go back to that old house which she had rendered in majolica, to walk through it and perhaps commune with her parents, to make her peace with them for ever having doubted her father's integrity as a human being, and to pray for their souls in a bountiful eternity.

But strangest of all had been her aunt's offering expeditious transportation to Pierre Laborde after her earlier reticence in meeting him. Alice did not recognize the name of Charles Harnett as a friend of either her aunt or uncle. And then Aunt Greta's having spoken Laborde's name, although it had not been mentioned in her presence—that too was strange. And even Laborde's own hesitance when he had spoken of her aunt and uncle. And one thing more, most singular of all—the fact that, ac-

cording to Laborde, her aunt and uncle had been in Paris, not Berlin. What did it all mean? She did not think she would get the answers from her aunt and uncle even if she asked. They had not told her everything. Surely there was a reason for that evasiveness, that omission. Perhaps one that concerned her.

She watched from the window of her room till she saw Miss Bruce's old Nash drive up along the dirt road beyond the house, then she took her overcoat and suitcase and went downstairs to meet her. But first she went into the kitchen where Aunt Greta was working.

"I want to say goodbye, Aunt Greta," she said softly. Her aunt turned with a gasp, her pale blue eyes widening at the sight of the suitcase and the overcoat. "But I thought it was tomorrow that you were leaving, *Liebchen?*"

"I—I've changed my mind, Aunt Greta. The sooner I can get to New York and get my passport, the sooner I'll be in Europe. And then I can get back in time for the fall term at Centralia. I—I'll write you and Uncle Otto."

"I wish you had waited till your Uncle Otto were here, *Kindchen*. I know he will be disappointed that you leave without saying goodbye."

"I know. I—I'm sorry, Aunt Greta. Please tell him I didn't mean to offend him, and that I thank him for everything he's done for me."

"It is Miss Bruce who has come to drive you, *nicht wahr?* You will go to West Frankfort to take the train to Chicago, I suppose?"

"Yes, Aunt Greta. I . . . I love you very much. Mr. Laborde told me that you took care of me from the day my mother died—I didn't know that."

Greta Miller's lower lip trembled, and she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron. "I wish –I wish things had been different, *Liebchen*. There is so much

you cannot know about life . . . the way it was in those awful days. Someday perhaps you will understand and think better of me—"

"But there's nothing to understand, Aunt Greta. You've been like my own mother. She died the day she gave me life, but you've brought me up from that day on—how could I feel except like a daughter to you?" Alice hugged and kissed her aunt, then retrieved her suitcase and coat. "Give Uncle Otto a kiss from me, Aunt Greta. And don't think too badly of me for rushing off this way. It—it's the excitement, knowing I've won—I've never seen any place but Murganville—it'll be good for me."

"Yes. Be careful. Have a good time and don't worry, *Kindchen.*" Again Greta Miller dabbed at her eyes.

Alice stood a moment, irresolute, then with a quick nod, she turned and went out of the house. Miss Bruce was standing there waiting for her, her face anxiously taut. "I've something for you, Miss Bruce, before we go. Let me get it—it's in the studio," Alice said. She set down her suitcase and hurried to the studio-barn. Moments later she returned with the newspaper-wrapped plate. She took a last look at the old farm house, at the shattered tree. "I'm ready now, Miss Bruce," she said.

Alice put her suitcase in the back of the sturdy old Nash and climbed in front next to Miss Bruce. "I made a going-away present for you, Miss Bruce," she said, quickly unwrapping the plate.

"Majolica! Oh, how beautiful, Alice! It's really exquisite—your shadings. And the texture!" Miss Bruce exclaimed. Her face was radiant as she took the plate and studied it, touching and pressing, stroking with a fingertip. "The picture of that old house—wherever did you get the idea?"

"It was my father's chateau in a little town near Paris. I saw it in the monograph you brought me. I—I don't

know how it happened, but I seem to have misplaced it. So I made that painting from memory."

"You misplaced the monograph? That doesn't sound like you at all, my dear."

"I know. I just can't understand it. I put it on the drying shelf in the studio, and I know I locked the door behind me. And then later, when I went back to look for it, it was gone. But nobody else has a key to get in there. And I'm sure I left it there."

Miss Bruce turned on the ignition. "We'd better get started if we want to make that train, Alice."

"Yes. I wish the train were faster. But I'm sure I can get on some plane to New York this evening. It's more likely to be crowded the end of the week than today."

"If we get to the station in time," Miss Bruce suggested, "you could call the airline and make sure of a reservation."

"That's an idea. Oh, Miss Bruce, I'm ever so grateful for your helping me out like this."

"I brought along $250, Alice. That ought to be ample for your plane fare and expenses in New York until you get your check."

"Oh, more than ample, I'm sure. I can't thank you enough!"

"There's no need. I'm only too happy to do it. Besides, I'd be a fine teacher if I didn't see my best pupil off in style, especially after she's just won a national competition."

"A man flew in from New York yesterday, Miss Bruce, and came to see me. He knew my father."

"My gracious! What a wonderful surprise that must have been!"

"It was. He used to be an art critic on a Paris newspaper, and he had some pieces my father had made for him when he got married. He donated them to the museum after his wife died. He was very nice."

"What did he tell you about your father, my dear?"

"The best news of all—that my father wasn't a Nazi. And something else too—that Uncle Otto and Aunt Greta had their shop in Paris, not Berlin, as I've always thought."

"Now isn't that strange? I wonder why they didn't tell you that."

"I don't know. It's all so mysterious. Mr. Laborde—that's his name—said that Uncle Otto was in love with my mother and was very angry when she married my father instead."

"That could explain why your uncle never spoke about your father. But then, why did he tell you your father was a Nazi when it wasn't so?"

Alice shook her head. "I don't know that either, Miss Bruce. I—I'm going to visit my father's old studio in Paris—Mr. Laborde gave me the address. And then I want to go to the chateau at Varlier. He says the art shop owner who had the property where my father's studio used to be bought the chateau after my father died, and that he kept my father's workroom just the way it was. Maybe—maybe I can find out what happened and why Uncle Otto would tell such a lie about my father. He's always been so kind to me, I don't know why he would lie about such a terribly important matter like that."

"Did this Mr. Laborde tell you anything else?"

"N-no, not really. But I know Aunt Greta recognized him—I hadn't even mentioned his name, but later, when she arranged for a friend of Uncle Otto's to drive him to Chicago, she spoke to him by name. He told me that Aunt Greta used to work in Uncle Otto's art shop in Paris and that he married her right after my father's death."

"He told you about your father's death?"

"Yes. He said he saw my father just before he died.

And later he read in the newspapers that my father died of poison."

"How terrible! You remember—your uncle told me, the day I brought you the monograph, that your father took his own life after he had asked your uncle to bring you up as his own child."

"Yes, I remember, Miss Bruce. I don't know why my father would have committed suicide—unless—unless it was out of grief over my mother's death. I could understand that, I think. And yet—he had his great ability as an artist to give him hope and courage to go on. Maybe I'll never find out why, Miss Bruce. But I have to try, I feel I must. And after that, maybe then I can begin to live my own life and no longer be obligated to Uncle Otto and Aunt Greta."

"How I wish I could go with you and look after you, Alice!" Miss Bruce exclaimed. "But please do be careful. You really oughtn't to go alone—you've never been out of Murganville before, you know."

"And only a few weeks ago you were telling me not to be a stick-in-the-mud," Alice laughed. "I'm old enough to look after myself, Miss Bruce. Of course I'll be careful. I'll visit the museums and the Cathedral of Notre Dame and—"

"I've drawn up a list of the places you ought to see, my dear," the elderly ceramist beamed. "And also, if you don't mind too much, the titles of some books on pottery I do wish you'd try to find for me. There's also a special blue frit glaze that I read they use in the Lercaut Porcelain Works in Paris. Perhaps you could get some—we could both try. It's a perfectly marvellous turquoise, and I'd love to try it on some of my little teacups."

"Of course I'll get some, and the books too, Miss Bruce. And I'll write you about all the sights of Paris."

"Now that's another thing, young lady. It's all very well to go traipsing off in the daytime to museums and

such, but when it comes to gallivanting out to nightclubs, you remember those Frenchmen have a way with them when it comes to pretty girls! That's why you really ought to have an escort—I could box Amy's ears for coming down with neuritis at a time like this!" Miss Bruce fumed, and her face was so serious that Alice couldn't help laughing.

"I promise I'll not flirt with any strange men, if that's what's worrying you, Miss Bruce. And I won't go gallivanting off to any disreputable nightclubs or anything like that."

"Good. I'm sure you can hire a dependable guide there, if you go out. And by all means, you should dine at some of those simply wonderful restaurants. I envy you that, Alice. No, I don't either. I'm just a selfish old woman."

"Now stop saying that or I'll be angry," Alice gently chided. "You're the most unselfish person I ever met, and I wouldn't be on my way to New York to get that prize if it hadn't been for you."

The old Nash pulled up in front of the West Frankfort railroad station at eighteen minutes of eleven, and Alice took her suitcase and coat and kissed Miss Bruce a fervent goodbye, much to the elderly teacher's pleased embarrassment. She stood by until Alice bought her ticket to Chicago and made a reservation by phone for a seat on the seven-thirty flight from O'Hare. Then she bade Alice Godspeed and urged her not to forget to write often.

There were only a few persons waiting for the train to Chicago. One of them was a young brown-haired man whose blue eyes seemed abnormally large because his lids had no eyelashes and his brows were almost nonexistent. He carried a duffel bag and he wore a light gray linen suit and black and white sports shoes. He was lean-

ing against an advertising poster, a toothpick between his teeth, his left hand dangling at his side. From time to time he eyed the attractive, dark-brown-haired young woman who stood, with her suitcase beside her and her light overcoat over one arm, watching the distant locomotive of the Chicago-bound train approach. His glance swept her trim legs, insolently detailing her as it ascended, and the fingers of his left hand flexed, then clenched into a fist.

Seventeen

The train was on time, and Alice took a cab to O'Hare International Airport. She arrived there by six-thirty and had a good hour before boarding. Since dinner would be served aboard, she spent the hour wandering through the many attractive shops, stopping at the magazine and bookstand, where she bought a new issue of *Crafts Horizon* and a paperback volume on primitive art.

Her first act had been to go to the United Air Lines counter to buy her ticket, then to check her suitcase aboard the flight. As she left the counter and walked on towards the gift shop to the right, the young man in the gray linen suit who had been watching her at the West Frankfort station walked up to the counter. "What's the next flight to New York?" he asked in a drawling voice. "Seven-thirty, sir," the brunette ticket clerk replied with an amiable smile.

"Can I get on?"

"Let me check that for you, sir. Just a moment, please." She scanned the passenger list. "Yes, sir. I can give you first class or coach. It's a dinner flight, of course. Arriving at Kennedy International Airport at

ten-fifteen New York time—they're an hour ahead of Chicago, as you know, sir."

"Make it first class. That's the way I like to go. Here." The young man dug into his trouser pocket. Extracting a bulging wallet, he casually peeled off a hundred-dollar bill and tossed it onto the counter. "Take it outa that, huh?"

"Certainly, sir. May I have your name for our passenger list?"

"Uh—sure. It's Harnett. Charles Harnett."

"Thank you, sir. Do you have any luggage? You can check it in right now before boarding."

"Just this bag. I guess I can carry it with me, huh?"

"Oh, yes. It's small enough. Thank you, Mr. Harnett, for flying United, and have a good trip."

"I plan to, honey," he drawled. "Maybe when I get back I'll ask you for a date—how'd that be?"

"Sorry, sir." The brunette showed sparkling white teeth in an amused smile. "It's against regulations. Besides—" she held up her left hand, on the third finger of which a square-cut diamond engagement ring glittered.

He shrugged, pocketing his wallet. "Your tough luck, honey. Have fun." He sauntered away, chuckling at her indignant gasp. Moving to the bar, he ordered a Scotch on the rocks, and downed it quickly; then ordered another, lit a cigarette and looked around with a detached air. When Alice again appeared in view, her magazine and book tucked into the pocket of her overcoat, his pale blue eyes lighted with an intense interest, and he craned his neck to watch the fluid movement of her thighs against her trim brown rayon skirt. He finished his drink and set the glass down with a thump. Then, sliding off the bar stool, he slowly ambled after her. . . .

The flight was uneventful for all save two passengers. One, in first class, got himself down in the red-haired stewardess's bad books, while she was serving dinner, by

insinuating his hand against the rondure of her blue-skirted hip and offering to escort her around New York on her days off. The redhead gave him an icy smile and informed him that she was flying back the very next morning. She also told the captain the next time she went up front that there was a fresh-face aboard who thought himself God's gift to women. The captain, who himself planned to ask the redhead for a date once the flight had landed, told her that was about par for the course.

The other passenger, in the coach section, found her first airplane, and first jet, flight a matter of wonder and delight. It was Alice Miller, and the blonde stewardess assigned to that section took time away from her other passengers to chat with this attractive, quiet and obviously highly appreciative young woman.

Alice was not especially philosophical by nature, but the plane's fantastic speed made her think of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, which she had read in high school. And this brought her to the thought that if it were possible to go back in time and space on such a conveyance as this, what might she not learn if she could remain at her age, yet arrange it so that she would be transported to a France of twenty years before. Yet with each gentle forward tug of the plane, she knew that she was closer to the truth of her own obscure and mysterious origin than she had ever been before in all those twenty years.

When the plane landed at Kennedy, she waited for her suitcase, then sought a cab and gave the driver the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel as her destination. She did not notice the other passenger waiting, smoking a cigarette and idly swinging his duffel bag as he observed her. As soon as Alice's cab had left, he got into the next one in line and ordered the driver to follow the cab ahead.

Despite not having reservations, Alice was able to find

a room and, after showering, sat down and wrote a quick airmail note to Miss Bruce to let her teacher know she had arrived safely and to thank her again for having helped her reach New York so quickly. Then, after asking the operator to call her at eight the next morning, she went to bed and fell asleep at once.

The man with the duffel bag did not go into the hotel directly, but into the lounge, where he had a Scotch on the rocks and a cigarette. Then he sauntered into the lobby and asked for the best room and bath available. He, too, was fortunate, and allowed a bellboy to carry the duffel bag, tossing him a dollar bill with airy nonchalance after he had been shown into a spacious room that cost nearly twice as much as Alice's.

He left no call. Indolently he undressed, his lips curved in a curious, humorless smile. Then he flung himself on the bed and was asleep almost at once. . . .

Wakened from a dreamless sleep by her eight-o'clock call, Alice thanked the operator, then quickly dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. Subsequently, she took a cab to the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art, arriving there shortly after nine. She asked the attendant at the first-floor desk where she could find Henry Duffield. He had her wait a moment while he dialed Duffield's telephone extension, then informed her that she was to go up to the fifth floor.

"What an unexpected surprise, Miss Miller! I was getting worried because you hadn't wired us." Henry Duffield was waiting for her at the elevator. In his mid-fifties, with pleasant regular features, spectacles, and an unruly shock of brown hair that was nearly gray, he had the bluff, hearty manner of a dynamic sales manager rather than that of an assistant curator of a museum. Alice warmed to him at once. "I'm glad you could come today instead of Friday, which is always crowded. And so far

as the press conference is concerned, we've a better chance of getting you into the Sunday papers. How was your trip?"

"Very pleasant, thank you."

"John Dudley, our head curator, ought to be down by ten. Meanwhile, may I buy you some breakfast?"

"I've already had some, thank you, but I'd enjoy another cup of coffee."

"Fine. We've a cafeteria in the basement. It's really quite good. Mr. Dudley is the gourmet of the museum, though, and I rather imagine he'll want to take you to some of New York's fine French restaurants."

"I'm really quite flustered about all this attention," Alice laughingly confessed as they stepped back into the elevator. "You know, I've never been outside Murganville in all my life till yesterday. And I'm thrilled beyond words to think that my entry actually won out over all the others—there are such fine crafts people everywhere."

"Very becoming modesty, Miss Miller. But the judges were unanimous in selecting your work as the very finest submitted. Now that we know you're the daughter of the great ceramist Heinrich Müller, it's perhaps not so surprising."

"I've a long way to go before I can equal his skill, and I'm the first to admit it, Mr. Duffield."

He carried the tray to a table near the wall, set it down, courteously drew out her chair, and sat down beside her. "Tell me, Miss Miller, where did you learn your ceramics?"

"Actually, my grammar-school teacher Mrs. Davies got me interested in working with clay. And then in high school, we had a Miss Joanne Bruce, who herself has won many prizes in ceramics; she came to Murganville to live with her sister and went back to teaching. I

owe her a tremendous debt for the technique she taught me and the inspiration she gave me."

Henry Duffield lifted his cup to her in a gesture of admiration. "You'll be superb newspaper copy, Miss Miller, with a refreshingly modest attitude like that. And it won't do a bit of harm to give this Miss Bruce of yours credit. Local teacher angle—always heartwarming. Also shows we're not being cliquish by picking an Easterner. Now, I dare say you'll want to think about how you're going to spend your prize money?"

"I'd like to go to Paris, Mr. Duffield."

"Quite proper and natural. When you've finished your coffee, we'll go back upstairs and I'll start phoning the newspapers. We can have the presentation of the award this afternoon—I'm sure Mr. Dudley will see to that. Then you can make the arrangements for your tickets and passport. And we'd like you to write a report for us on your travels—what art museums you visit, that sort of thing, you know. Just a formality."

"Of course." *But I won't put in anything about the chateau at Varlier*, Alice thought. . . .

"So here's our winner—and just as beautiful as the set she made for us, eh Duffield?"

John Dudley was sixty-eight, but showed no sign of flagging energy. Almost six feet tall, portly, with heavy jowls and hawk nose and fierce thick white brows, he exuded a vitality men half his age would have envied. He shook hands with Alice, eying her up and down till she flushed, then chuckled, "Just between the three of us, my dear, it's as well I didn't see that photo of you till after we judges decided on the pieces. Because if you hadn't won, and I had seen it, I'd have swung the decision over to you anyway. The most photogenic ceramic winner we've had in a generation, by God!" He glared at Duffield as if daring the latter to dispute that praise.

"Thank you, Mr. Dudley."

"Thank *you*, Alice. Let me call you that. I'm old enough to be your father and then some. Duffield, have you contacted the press?"

"I took the liberty of doing that already. They'll be here at two-thirty."

"Good, good! Give us just time for lunch. Alice, you'll be my guest at The Four Seasons, won't you?"

"I'd enjoy that very much. Thank you, Mr. Dudley."

"I'll enjoy showing off a beautiful young woman like you at a place like that, believe me. All right, now, let's show you the special display we're making of your set, eh, Alice? Come along, Duffield."

On the third floor of the museum, in a room in the west wing, Alice saw her coffee service set arranged in the center of a beautifully ornate teakwood buffet, with a large, neatly hand-lettered card announcing her as the winner of the national ceramics competition sponsored by the museum. The pieces of the two other winners were exhibited also, on a cherrywood table. On the wall were blown-up photographs of all of the prize-winning entries, as well as examples of Dudley's own work. But what delighted her most was to see the pieces her own father had made, those which Pierre Laborde had told her he had commissioned for himself and later donated to the museum, on glass shelves inside a narrow upright case on the top of which stood a copy of the German monograph which Miss Bruce had given her and which she had so inexplicably misplaced.

She went directly to the case and stood looking at her father's handiwork, tears blurring her eyes not only in response to that filial urge she need no longer deny, but also to the exquisite beauty and delicacy expressed in clay by his immortal hand. . . .

Lunch at The Four Seasons was memorable not only for the food and wine but also for John Dudley's colorful opinions on ceramics and his account of his European

travels. Henry Duffield tactfully let his superior monopolize the conversation. Over tournedos and a delicious Volnay—Alice's first adventure with the wines of France—he expatiated on the historical schools of pottery, from the first glazes of ancient Egypt—dating back to 3000 B.C.—and the fascinating use of malachite, that bluish-green mineral containing copper, not only as a pottery glaze but also as a powder for the eye shadow of Egyptian beauties, to the techniques of Delft, the porcelain of the Medici, and the modern Finnish concern known throughout the world as "Arabia Potteries."

He dwelt, too, on her father's work, with an extravagance of praise that swept away the last vestigial doubt over the pride she felt in being the daughter of Heinrich Muller. "I hope in your visit to Paris, my dear," he remarked, "that you can find specimens of his work. And if they're available for sale, send me a cable and give me the data. The museum would like to acquire more of his creations. We have only those pieces Pierre Laborde was kind enough to donate to us after his wife's regrettable death."

"I'll certainly look for them, Mr. Dudley," Alice promised.

"Now I want you to try some of that fantasy cake they're famous for here. And coffee and a *creme de cacao.*" Over her mild protest, he gave voluble orders to the smiling waiter, then went on, "This Laborde fellow is himself an art dealer, you know. He told me he was flying to California and intended to stop off and visit with you in the hope he could see you before you came to New York."

"I saw him Tuesday, Mr. Dudley. He—he knew my father very well. I hope I can see him here before I leave for Paris, because I want to tell him how grateful I am for what he told me."

"I'm sure he'll be back. He's to buy something for us

out there, too, you see. We expect him by Monday at the latest. Good gracious—we'd better get back to the museum. It's almost two-thirty. But you must let me take you out to dinner some evening when we can devote more time to the cuisine and the wine." He chuckled genially. "I'm grateful to you for letting me show you off. You've been drawing admiring glances from every male patron here. And you've no idea how that flatters an old man's ego!"

Eighteen

ALICE RETURNED to the museum with John Dudley and Henry Duffield to find herself something of a celebrity, for representatives of every New York newspaper were on hand for the conference. She was interviewed, photographs were taken of her winning coffee service set and of her accepting the winner's check from John Dudley. By the time the publicity session was over, it was past four o'clock, and John Dudley had urged her to put off till the next day her application for a passport and plane tickets to Paris. Then he invited her to dinner at Quo Vadis, where she enjoyed Bruno's incomparable chicken Gismonda and was introduced to the tart delicacy of a 1961 *Pouilly Fuisse*.

The next morning, she went to the American Express office and changed her museum check for travelers' checks, then took a cab to the ticket office of Air France to make a reservation and inquire about her passport. She learned that it would be necessary to get a vaccination certificate from the Board of Health and that the passport could be issued in about four days. With this in mind, she bought her round-trip place ticket to Paris, scheduled to leave on the 10 a.m. flight the following

Friday. Finally, she went for her vaccination and filled out the necessary papers for the passport. . . .

Alice's fellow traveler on the plane to New York had followed her to the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art on Thursday and visited the room where her winning ceramics set was on display. The friendly middle-aged woman attendant on duty in the room informed him that Miss Miller was meeting the press that afternoon and that undoubtedly the Sunday papers would carry the full story. He seemed to know a good deal about the competition and after casually inquiring if the winner had decided on her European itinerary, learned that the lovely brown-haired potter had selected Paris. From further questioning he learned how long it would take to obtain a French passport. The attendant saw nothing unusual in his interest, mainly because he went out of his way to thank her for her courtesy.

On Friday, he took a cab to the Air France office on Madison Avenue and made a round-trip reservation. Finding out what flight Alice was booked on was a simple matter. The piquant brunette at the Air France office flushed prettily at his compliments, and was readily sworn to silence when he begged her not to tell Alice that he was taking the same flight, as he wished it to be a surprise since they had been sweethearts back in the Midwest. Afterwards he attended to his passport details.

This done, he took a cab to Grand Central Station, where, from a public phone booth, he placed a long-distance person-to-person call. The conversation was brief, but eminently satisfactory so far as he was concerned, for when he left the booth his pale blue eyes glittered with a secret anticipation and his lips twitched in a faintly derisive smile. There would be a week of pleasant dalliance ahead for him in New York, now that he had successfully carried out the first part of his mission. He had heard that girls of easy virtue could be found—and had

—in Greenwich Village by those with money to spend on a good time. Surely they could help him pass the time most pleasantly till next Friday morning. . . .

For Alice, the week was delightfully spent visiting such museums as the Metropolitan and the Guggenheim; taking the Hudson River boat ride and the Grayline tour around the city, and lunching and dining with both John Dudley and Henry Duffield. She wrote to Miss Bruce and promptly returned the loan. She also wrote to her aunt and uncle, though not so lengthily, and she did not tell them what day she expected to fly to Paris. She did, however, mention that Pierre Laborde had not returned to New York as he had expected to. It was a matter of some concern to John Dudley, who was waiting to hear from the former French journalist about the commission he had given the latter. And when there was no word by Thursday, the day before Alice was to leave, he telephoned the art dealer in Los Angeles whom Laborde was to have visited on behalf of the museum, only to learn that the little Frenchman had not yet arrived.

"You're sure he told you he was going on to the West Coast, Alice?" he asked the young ceramist, his thick brows knitted with worry.

"Yes, he did, Mr. Dudley. My aunt called a friend of hers to drive him direct to Chicago, so he could get an earlier plane," Alice replied.

"That's very strange. Well, I won't bother you any more about our little problems, Alice. It's been wonderful having you as our guest, and I'm looking forward to your written report about your trip. Do keep in touch with me when you get back to the States." John Dudley held out his hand.

"I will, Mr. Dudley. It's been a wonderful week for me, and you've been very hospitable. I can't thank you enough."

He held her hand somewhat longer than necessary be-

fore releasing it. "You've done me a world of good, girl," he chuckled with a sardonic wink. "You've made me feel twenty years younger. Well, have a good trip tomorrow —I know you will. And before you go, would you let me have your telephone number at home? I know Duffield's got it somewhere, but if I don't hear from that rascal Laborde, I'm going to call and see what happened to him." Then he chuckled again and roguishly added, "Besides, I might just feel like calling you some day when I get to feeling too much like an old man weighed down by the ceramics section of this museum."

"Mr. Dudley, you'll never be old, you're too much fun," Alice laughed, and gave him a spontaneous kiss on the cheek. . . .

The big jet set down smoothly at Orly Field on Friday night. It had been a smooth flight on a beautiful August day, and Alice had felt not the slightest fear at crossing the Atlantic. She had taken along a handbook of French grammar and vocabulary to brush up on her smattering of the language, and had paid little attention to the other passengers. The vivacious willowy blonde stewardess, a native Parisian who spoke fluent English, had chatted with her a good deal throughout the journey, pointing out places of interest and briefing Alice on life in Paris. She had also recommended a moderately priced hotel a few blocks from 17, Rue St. Vincent, the address Alice had mentioned she wanted to visit. A few hours later, Alice was sound asleep in a room on the third floor of that hotel. She slept with a smile on her lips, relaxed by the serenity of knowing that at last she was on the threshold of the door of the past . . . a past which she now unwaveringly believed could hold no terrors for her. . . .

Numero 17, Rue St. Vincent, was in the middle of a sprawling, three-story, red brick building. It was a wide

store with three aisles, and a counter at the right, at the head of which a young bespectacled blonde girl presided, evidently as cashier. Drawers and cabinets of art supplies, from drawing paper to palettes and tubes of paint, were neatly arranged. In the spacious glass window showcases were copies of oils by Cezanne and Van Gogh and Degas, lithographs of the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as a display of elegant green-glazed pottery and several handsomely bound books on the craft.

The shop was crowded; a bearded young painter in a beret haggled over the cost of a tube of vermillion with a sales clerk, and a model on the arm of another painter was whispering some intimate joke which caused a shout of laughter. It might have been a scene out of Montmartre.

Alice looked around for someone to come to her aid, but she went unnoticed, until finally a black-haired young man in a blue clerk's coat made his way through the jostling throng of customers and stood beside her.

"*Mademoiselle desire quelque chose?*" he asked.

"Oh—I—I'm afraid I don't speak French well enough—"

"An American, then. I speak English. My name is Raoul Beringer."

"Oh, I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Beringer. My name is Alice Miller. Pierre Laborde told me to come here to ask about my father."

He was decidedly good-looking, she thought. Regular features, candid blue eyes, a frank mouth. Not at all sleek or moustached. And he had a clear pleasant baritone voice and looked her straight in the face.

"Heinrich Müller was my father. Pierre Laborde said this was where my father had his *atelier*."

"Heinrich Müller was your father? But that's amazing! My father was a good friend of yours. I myself was only a boy then, but I remember him myself. You have come

all the way from the United States to inquire about your father?"

"Yes, in a way. You see, I—I'm a potter too, and I entered a competition of the Museum of Primitive and Modern Art, and I won first prize. And the money was to be spent visiting leading art centers in Europe—so—well, I came here because I knew my father had lived here."

"*Mam'selle* Miller, won't you step into the office? It will be quieter, I assure you. We do a good deal of business with the young painters and art students, and it's always crowded like this on a Saturday morning. Please come this way." He took her by the hand and led her through the chattering throng of painters and models, a quiet word being enough to make them give way and leave passage for him and Alice. She flushed at the assurance and strength of his grasp as she followed his lead.

"Now, then, that's better," he said when he had closed the glass door of the office at the rear of the shop. "Do sit down, Miss Miller. So you saw Pierre Laborde. How is that old rascal? He was very good to me. My father and he were great friends."

"He came to Murganville—that's a small town in Illinois where I have lived nearly all my life—just after I learned I'd won the contest. He told me about this shop and about you and your father, and about the chateau at Varlier."

"Yes, my father bought it a few years after your father's death, *Mam'selle* Miller. He is retiring from the business now—he hasn't been too well. You saw the sign, *Beringer et Fils*, outside? I will always keep it that way, even if he gives up the shop. It was his life for so long."

"The museum asked if I could find any of my father's pieces while I'm in Paris. They would like to buy them for their collection. And I'd like to see anything that belonged to him. Is there anything still left in this shop?"

Raoul Beringer shook his head. "Alas, no, *Mam'selle* Miller. You see, it was twenty years ago that your father had his *atelier*. It was on the second floor of this building. Then after he died and the war ended, my father moved everything in the *atelier* into our storage room in the cellar. And when he bought the chateau, he brought it out there. I know that he has kept the library, where your father used to work, just as it was in the old days. He is living there now, you see, with old Jules, who is the caretaker, and a cook and a serving maid. I visit him every weekend."

"Would it be an imposition on you if I asked you to let me go with you the next time you visit him?"

"But of course not, *Mam'selle*. He would certainly want to see you, and he can tell you a great deal about your father."

"And perhaps about my uncle, too. Did you know him?"

Raoul Beringer nodded. "His name was Otto Müller, and he was an art dealer with a shop not far from here. I didn't like him, because he was too friendly with the *Boches*."

"He—he took me to the United States and to that small town, Mr. Beringer. And he is mayor there now," Alice said slowly.

"*C'est incroyable!* Otto Müller an official of your country? But how can that be possible?"

"Why, yes, he's been mayor for six years. He uses the name of Miller, so that there is no tie with the past."

Raoul Beringer uttered a sardonic little laugh. "That I can well understand. He would not wish to have the past brought back to life, I think. But my father can tell you much more than I. I only know he acted towards me like an overbearing *Boche* and made fun of me when I was a boy. And that he wanted your father to be more friendly to his own countrymen because he too was Ger-

man. But your father was not proud of what the Germans had become, and as an artist he preferred to work and live in Paris."

Alice stared at him, trying to grasp what he had told her. For if Otto Miller had accused her father of having been a Nazi, while all the time he himself was friendly to the representatives of that regime, it meant that he had lied to her from the start. Not only about her father, but perhaps about much more. And if her aunt had known all this too, then it was no wonder she had recognized Pierre Laborde back at the farmhouse without Alice's ever having mentioned his name.

Now, more than ever, she had to visit the chateau at Varlier. Within its walls, she might uncover that which would reveal the truth behind all the years of lies.

"When may I meet your father, Mr. Beringer?" she asked, her voice unsteady.

"Why, tonight, *Mam'selle* Miller. As soon as we close the shop this afternoon, I'm going to drive to Varlier. I'd be delighted to have you accompany me."

Nineteen

A LITTLE GRAY CITRÖEN slowed down in front of 17, Rue St. Vincent. Inside, at the wheel, a brown-haired man with pale blue eyes, wearing a gray linen suit, lit a cigarette and stared at the door of the shop as smock-clad, beret-sporting painters hurried in and out, some with pretty girls on their arms. His eyes followed the girls, detailing the play of their limbs, and from time to time a muscle twitched in his cheek as his gaze narrowed on a particularly attractive model. He smoked two cigarettes. Then he started up the car and drove down the narrow street towards a *bistro*, where he parked the car and got out. He returned a few minutes later with a long-necked bottle of Beaujolais, a loaf of crusty French bread and a sausage in its casing, laid his purchase on the seat beside him, took out a map from the dashboard, studied it a moment, then, lighting another cigarette, drove northward.

The Citröen left the city limits and took the modern highway to the north, passing through Durieres, a small village with a massive stone church that dated from the fifteenth century. The driver paid no heed to the church, but only to the signs on the road, consulting his map to make sure of his direction.

About an hour later, the roadway sign announced Varlier. The Citröen took the next turn to the right, along a narrower, badly paved road that entered, about half a mile farther on, a dense forest. Midway through the forest, the driver steered the little car into a clearing, shut off the motor and got out, taking the wine, bread and sausage and setting them on the ground. Then he opened the dashboard and drew out a snubnosed automatic. Expertly he took out the clip, assured himself that there were six bullets in it and one in the chamber, replaced the clip, snapped the safety catch into place, and pocketed the gun. Picking up his provender, he began to walk through the forest until he came, a quarter of a mile beyond, to a long grassy plain that stretched out for nearly a mile. Whistling tunelessly, he quickened his steps until he came to the scarred remains of a razed building.

The grass had grown back over the ruined edifice. All that was left was a series of stone archways, like doors, half-emerging from the earth. A stone path, which had defied the grass at the top of the archways, as if connecting them, led onward along the slowly ascending plain to a distant knoll. About a quarter of a mile beyond, on that knoll, stood the brownstone structure of the old chateau, with its striking mid-sectional, sharply vertical peak ending in a rectangular chimney.

The man in the gray linen suit took a booklet, creased and dirtied, out of his coat pocket, opened it to a picture, and stared out towards the distant knoll. Then his lips curved in a sardonic grin. He tore the booklet into shreds. A title page fluttered to the ground, half-hidden by the thick grass. All that was visible were the words, "*Veit und Sohnen*, Leipzig, 1964."

Then he strode towards the series of stone archways, which formed shallow caves. In one of them, he heard the shrill piping of field mice. His lips twisted viciously as he picked up a heavy rock and flung it at the nest at

the extreme back corner of the archway-cave. Then he walked to the next archway, inspecting its interior. Satisfied, he crawled inside, leaning his back against one of the rising stone curves, stretching out his legs, and sighed contentedly. Lifting the bottle, he smacked its thin neck against the tip of the arch to break it, then put the bottle to his lips after making certain that no jagged edge could cut his mouth, and took a hearty swig. Settling it down beside him, he broke off a chunk of bread and wolfed it down. Then he took the sausage, dug in his trousers pocket for a jacknife, and cut off a slice, stuffed it into his mouth and chewed voraciously, washing it down with another swig of wine. The sun was high in the cloudless blue sky. It was shortly past noon. Belching, he eased himself further down along the ground, his head propped up against the start of the inner arch, and went to sleep. . . .

Raoul Beringer took Alice to lunch in the same little bistro where the driver of the Citröen had stopped to buy his bread, wine and sausage. In the back room, there were stone-topped tables on the sawdust floor, and soon Alice was ravenously eating one of the tastiest stews she had ever savored, washing it down with a glass of hearty young Beaujolais, and listening to Raoul Beringer tell about his schooling in Switzerland and his hobbies of chess and music and watercolors. His mother had died when he was fifteen and his father had never remarried. There were times, he wryly admitted, when, seeing the daubs some of the pseudo painters and perspicacious but totally untalented art students turned out, he had strong aspirations to do more with his watercolors. But the past five years his father's ill health had left him little time except to look after the shop. And, also because of his father's virtual withdrawal from the business, he often had to visit collectors and antique dealers to buy special pieces for clients like Pierre Laborde.

Alice found him extremely congenial, possessed of a sense of humor, and, what was more important, tactful enough not to dwell too long on his own achievements. Deftly he turned the conversation back half a dozen times to her own background, her methods of preparing clay and glazes, till she found herself talking much more than was her wont and with a good deal more enthusiasm than she had been able to converse with anyone back in Murganville except Miss Bruce.

At four-thirty, the shop was at last emptied and the clerks dismissed till Monday. Raoul Beringer turned out the lights and locked up after tallying the day's receipts and locking them in a little safe down in the storage cellar. "I must apologize for having made you waste a whole afternoon, *Mam'selle* Miller," he said as he opened the front door to let her out, then turned the key and pocketed it. "But I should very much like you to be our guest at the chateau over the weekend. And next week, if I can get my head clerk Bertrand to take over, I should like to escort you around Paris. Frankly, *Mam'selle*, I was looking for an excuse to take a tiny vacation, and *voila*, you have furnished me with one—that is, if you will accept my poor services as a guide."

She threw back her lovely head and laughed as she had never laughed in Murganville. "I'm sure you'd make a marvelous guide, Mr. Beringer. And I'll take you up on that. With just one stipulation—since I'm here to study art, and that's what the prize money is supposed to be used for, I'll insist that you take me to places like the Louvre and other museums."

"My solemn oath, *Mam'selle*. On one condition, too."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"That you call me Raoul, not Mr. Beringer. And that I may call you Alice. It is so much less formal and stilted than *Mam'selle* Miller."

"Agreed!"

"Do you see that series of archways, half buried in the ground, Alice?"

"Yes. Ever since I saw the picture of the chateau in that German monograph, I wondered what that building was."

Raoul's Fiat had taken the narrow road through the forest after the turnoff, then turned to the right, where the road became little more than a dirt path, far to the right of the razed old building. Eventually it ascended the knoll and led to the chateau.

"During the Franco-Prussian War, that was a French military academy. It was shelled by Prussian cannon and abandoned. And then, in World War One, it was destroyed by a bomb dropped by a Zeppelin. The chateau dates back to the time of Napoleon III . . . as a matter of fact, it was built the year the Emperor Maximilian was shot by the Juaristas—perhaps you remember that tragic piece of history."

"Yes, and how his devoted Empress Carlotta went mad with grief. How dreadful that history is so full of suffering for innocent people."

He glanced at her admiringly. "You have a good heart, Alice. I am very happy that you decided to visit Paris."

He said it so guilelessly that it was a long moment before she blushed. . . .

The man drowsing in the half-buried archway-cave yawned and rose to his feet, flexing his shoulders, swinging his arms, to restore their circulation. The moon had risen, a quarter-moon, and there were dark clouds which suggested rain the next day. He stooped, picked up the bottle, and emptied it with a long, final swig, then flung it against the back of the archway with a shattering of glass. He stretched his hands up to the top of the stone, hauled himself up to the winding pathway and began to walk slowly towards the knoll. As he approached it, he could see a blue Fiat parked near the entrance. He slipped

his right hand into his coat pocket to make sure the snub-nosed automatic was in place, grinned, then continued to walk towards the knoll. . . .

"How's my father tonight, Jules?"

The lean old caretaker shook his head. "*Pas trop bon, M'sieu Raoul.* He has been asking for you. I have made him as comfortable as I could in the wheelchair till Dr. Leclerc visits him tomorrow."

"*Merci,* Jules. Tell Augustine we should like supper, *Mam'selle* and I. One of her good omelets, or perhaps a *quiche Lorraine,* and a bottle of the 1961 Vouvray. I will take my father's supper to him."

"*Oui, M'sieu Raoul,* I shall tell Augustine. Be welcome, *Mam'selle* Miller."

"She is more than a casual guest, Jules. Her father once owned this chateau."

"*Vraiment?*" The elderly servant smilingly bowed to Alice. "He was a great artist. The chateau is greatly honored, *Mam'selle.*"

"Thank you, Jules. It's so strange, Raoul. Of course I couldn't remember being here as a tiny baby, but just from seeing that photograph, it all seems so familiar . . . as if I really belong here."

"I understand, Alice. Now come along and meet my father. He's in his study."

Robert Beringer had been a sturdy man, but severe gout had emaciated him and drawn his pleasant round face with pain. The skin of his florid cheeks was loose, and his once keenly vivid brown eyes hollow and dull. He plucked nervously at his sparse white moustache as he heard the door open; Jules had moved his wheelchair to a huge bay window that looked out on the great tree Alice had seen in the photo of the book Miss Bruce had given her.

"Is that you, Raoul?" he quavered.

"Yes, *mon père*. And with a visitor you will want to meet. Alice, this is my father. *Mon père*, this is Alice Miller. She is Heinrich Müller's daughter."

The old man gasped, his eyes widening as Alice faced him, smiling compassionately. "*C'est comme un miracle!* How much you resemble her, *ma petite!* The same eyes, the same gentle mouth, the delicacy of your features—yes, it's as if the clock had been turned back those twenty years. And how is it that you have come back at last to where you were born, *ma petite?*"

Quickly Alice explained how she had been brought up by her aunt and uncle, how she had learned to work with clay and won the national competition whose first prize had enabled her to visit Paris and to look for 17, Rue St. Vincent.

"He was always a good friend, that Laborde," Robert Beringer murmured. "It is good that you met him at last. He worshipped your father's genius—as I did myself. I have kept the library, where your father did much of his design and which he used sometimes as a workroom, just as he left it. Fortunately the government, in the interim after your father's tragic death and my acquisition of the chateau, altered nothing."

"Can you eat a little something, *mon père?*" Raoul Beringer solicitously inquired. "We should like, if we may, to take our meal here with you."

The old man's face brightened as he nodded. "Yes, yes, but of course you shall. Already I feel better, seeing you, *ma petite*. What happy memories it brings back." Then his face shadowed. "Yes—and what terrible ones, *ma foi*. But let us think only of those happier times. *Vite*, Raoul, tell Augustine I think I have a little appetite. She knows what I can eat—that hard-hearted *médicin* Leclerc has told her."

Raoul brought in a tray for his father, while plump, motherly, gray-haired Augustine brought in a mushroom

omelet, tossed salad, a bottle of Vouvray and freshly baked cherry tarts for the two young people. Raoul maneuvered the wheelchair up to a table, seated himself beside his father and aided the old man, while Robert Beringer chatted away as if the recollections of twenty years ago were as vivid as yesterday's own.

And when the meal was finished and Augustine returned to take away the dishes and the trays, Raoul turned to Alice and said, "Now you shall see your father's workroom."

He wheeled his father out of the study down the long narrow hallway, with its stone flagging and its Gothic arches resembling those of the ruined old building back on the grassy plain below. At last they came to a wide, massive wooden door. Robert Beringer slowly delved in his coat pocket and, drawing out a key on a chain, handed it to his son. Raoul fitted the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. The hinges creaked from rust and disuse, and Alice shivered at the sound.

It was a spacious room, with three Gothic windows which looked out upon the isolated tree with its widely spreading branches. There was a heavy, decoratively scrolled mahogany table and several straight-backed chairs of the same scrolled pattern. Near the window at the right stood the potter's wheel, surrounded by a radius of five feet of heavy linoleum flooring, on which Alice could see dried smears of clay. Bookcases lined the opposite wall and both walls on either side of the heavy door. To the left of the wheel stood a large mahogany cupboard, with three pullout drawers at the bottom, and two paneled doors at the top; its decor, too, bore the same ornate scrollwork as the table and the chairs.

Alice walked to the wheel and touched it lovingly. A high stool stood before it; here her father had sat, operating the wheel with a foot control, and creating those enchanting pieces for Pierre Laborde. Perhaps, where

she stood now, her own mother had watched her father at work, touched him, kissed him, summoned him to the evening meal. Emotion made her close her eyes for a moment.

"In the cellar, *ma petite*," Robert Beringer explained, "your father had his kiln and mixed his glazes. But it was here he designed almost all of his work the last years of his life. Sometimes he came back to the old *atelier* when he wished to buy supplies or food and wine."

"May I open the cupboard?" Alice asked in a voice that trembled with excitement. The man in the wheelchair nodded. She walked to the heavy cupboard and pulled open both paneled doors. There were three broad shelves, on which stood books on ceramics in German, French and Italian, several unfired clay pieces—bowls, ornamental tiles, plates—and numerous hand tools used in shaping and designing.

She turned back to Robert Beringer, who nodded again. "Those were his last things, *ma petite*. He died before he could fire and glaze them."

Even in their preliminary shapes, molded only by her father's sensitive fingers, those pieces of clay communicated at once the purity and poetry of his gifted expression.

She knelt down now and drew open the bottom drawer of the cupboard. In it, wrapped in cloths, were half a dozen large balls of clay. He had kept them there to dry before using them on the wheel. Five of them were wrapped in white linen cloths; the sixth was wrapped in black. She lifted that last one out, then unwrapped the cloth. The clay was black and dry, formless. She held it in her hands, staring at it—and then she uttered a cry. For as her fingers had closed around it, it had crumbled, dry as dust.

And then she uttered another cry. On the linoleum, amid the fragments and powdery substance of that old

clay, there glistened a narrow strip of film, like a negative. She picked it up and rose, holding it up to the light. It was indeed a negative, and there were two persons shown on it, one a moon-faced, smiling man in cap and uniform, the other a tall slim man with thin-lipped mouth.

"It's a picture, hidden in the clay," she exclaimed, and she handed it to the old man in the wheelchair.

He held it up to the light of a tall lamp. "Here, after all these years," he said, "is the proof that your father was an honorable man and would not take the easy way."

"What do you mean, Mr. Beringer?"

He uttered a curt, sardonic chuckle. "My eyes can still recognize a picture of *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Goering, the so-called liberator of European art treasures. And the man standing beside him is Otto Müller, your father's brother, an art dealer who worked as Goering's agent and procured many of these treasures for his Nazi master."

"Then—then my uncle was a Nazi," Alice said slowly, "and he let me think all these years that it was my father instead who had turned his back on humanity."

"I had suspected as much, *ma petite*," Robert Beringer replied, "but I never had the proof. Once your father made a remark in my presence, which now explains a little why his brother hated him so. He said, as best I can remember, 'There are those who would like to smuggle jewels and gold and rare miniatures out of Europe, things that don't belong to them. Clay would hide them, but I would never shape clay to that purpose.' So Otto Müller, knowing how famous his brother was as a ceramist, must have tried to induce him to bury some of Goering's loot in clay, make it into decorative pieces of pottery and keep it safe for a victory that never came."

"Dear God!" Alice breathed. "So that was the secret my uncle kept from me all these years. And now I know why Pierre Laborde told my aunt that he congratulated

my uncle, and that not everyone had done so well with a new life."

Outside and far down the hall, there came a muffled cry.

"What was that?" Raoul strode to the door and flung it open. Then slowly, he raised his hands and retreated backwards into the room. Alice put a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with stupefaction. A man in a rumpled gray linen suit was leveling a snubnosed automatic at Raoul Beringer's heart. The sneering smile on that wide, full-lipped mouth . . . the man who had driven up to the farmhouse to pick up Pierre Laborde.

Twenty

"WHO ARE YOU and by what right do you force yourself in here, *M'sieu?*" Robert Beringer angrily demanded.

The man with the automatic looked over at the old man in the wheelchair. "Business, dad, so don't butt in and you'll be okay. Now then, what did you find in your old man's things, Alice baby?"

"I beg your pardon!" Alice gasped, as her mind's eye squinted at the memory of this man who had driven up in the blue Buick that day back in Murganville.

"Yeah, you're gonna do that, too, before I'm done withcha, honey," he drawled. "You'n me's got a little account to settle. But, like I said, business first. Now come across—I know you came snoopin' here to find out about your old man. Seein' that dirt spilled all over the floor tells me you found somethin'—now, where is it and what is it?"

"Who are you?" Alice stared at him in bewilderment.

"That's right, I guess maybe you wouldn't recognize me. The plastic surgeon and the dentist did a helluva job, Alice honey. Made me even more good-lookin' than I was down at the shack that day you threw the clay in my face—"

"M-Matt Harshaw—but—but I thought—"

"Yeah, that's what everybody did," he chuckled, pleased at her horrified astonishment, but fully aware that Raoul had taken a step forward. "Go on, buddy, back up! I've got seven bullets in this automatic, and I know how to use it, get me? Okay now, Alice. I had quite a time followin' you. But it was sorta fun, at that. Your uncle paid all my expenses. Just like he paid the doc and the dentist to fix me up real nice after that smashup I was in."

"Uncle Otto p-paid you—to—to follow me here?"

Again he chuckled. "Sure. And don't think I haven't got him where I want him for later on, in case he gets balky about payin' me more dough. This is a real big job, Alice girl."

"But why?"

"You're really curious, ain'tcha? Well, your Uncle Otto 'n me's been friends for quite a while. He sorta thought I'd make you a good hubby—figurin' you needed a guy that could make you knuckle under, a real man like me. Yeah, a guy that'd take your mind off snoopin' 'n makin' mudpies all the time."

"He—he said that?"

"Sure. In the old country, he said, women knew their place. And their men kept 'em in it. Anyway, when I had this accident and my old man kicked me out, I gave your Uncle Otto a ring. He told me he'd stake me to a brand-new face, and maybe I could pay him back some day. Then when you started askin' questions about your old man, he got real nervous. And when you won that pot-makin' contest and got the dough to take off for Europe, he had me trail you. He knew you'd make a beeline for this shack, baby, and he was right. He told me all about the old days—boy, he was really a big wheel for the Nazis, you know."

"Did—did he actually say that?" Her face was pale and drawn.

Matt Harshaw nodded. "Uh huh. He stored a lotta real valuable stuff for the bigwigs. And he wanted your dad to help him get the rest out by hidin' the stuff in that mushy clay'n shippin' it to Switzerland till after the war. Only your dad wouldn't go along with him and threatened to blab to the French cops about your Uncle Otto. That's when he slipped him a Mickey in his wine."

"Oh, my God—and all these years I loved Uncle Otto and was grateful for all he'd done for me!" Alice groaned.

"That place he fixed up for you and all the stuff he bought you so you could make your mudpies—well, I guess that was to buy you off for what he'd done. Anyhow, that don't matter now, Alice baby."

"Did—did my Aunt Greta know all this?"

"Sure. She was sorta nuts about your old man, too, but he couldn't see her for dirt. And when that Frenchie came to see you at the farm, she had your uncle phone me—I was hanging out in West Frankfort waitin' to hear from him—so I'd come take care of him."

"T-take—take care of him—you—you mean you killed Mr. Laborde?"

"Uh huh. I got a big bonus for that. Had myself lotsa fun with dames in New York the week I was foolin' around waitin' for you to get on a plane and head for this dump. An' y'know somethin', baby, none'a the dames I had ever got me half as worked up as you do. Okay, that's enough talk now. What did you find here? Come on, I know you musta found somethin'—let's have it quick!"

Alice bit her lip. Robert Beringer had thrust the negative under the fold of his dressing gown. She eyed Raoul, wanting to signal him not to be foolish, for he stood, fists clenched, tense, as if ready to throw himself on Matt Harshaw, who had taken the name of Charles Harnett along with his new face.

"Come on, come on, I wanna get outa this crummy old house. You'n me's gonna have some fun. Yeah, sure, Alice. If you behave yourself, I won't hafta kill you, know what I mean, Alice baby? Now, what's all that dirt on the floor? What didja find in it, huh?" He moved forward, holding Raoul at bay with the gun unwaveringly aimed at the latter's heart.

"N-nothing. I—I was just going to look in those other balls of clay," Alice stammered, her mind desperately groping for some way to trick her smirking pursuer.

"Okay, fine, you just go ahead and look, then. And I'll be watchin' real close—so don't try anything funny. I'd sure hate to shoot a cute-looking piece like you, Alice, but I will if I hafta!" He gestured angrily with the gun.

"All—all right." She knelt down, trembling violently, and pulled open the bottom drawer.

"Yeah—I see watcha mean about those other balls'a clay. So start takin' 'em apart and lessee what your old man stashed away inside. Your Uncle Otto had a notion he mighta tried to get some message to the French cops, but he wasn't sure what it was. They had a big squabble the day before your uncle slipped him that Mickey, and your old man said he'd see that Uncle Otto got what was comin' to him for bein'a thief and traitor to his own country—yeah, that's what your old man said—he sure was a sap, the way he thought about things. So what did it get him? He could'a had a good chunk'a the dough your uncle had wangled for himself. But the way it worked out, your uncle took it all an' sneaked over to Lisbon an' bought himself a fake passport an' flew on down to South America an' then came up through Mexico into the U.S. Yeah, Alice honey, dough sure can buy anythin', take it from me. It made your uncle mayor'a Murganville, didn't it? Hell, he's not even a citizen. And he's gonna pay me off for a long time to keep my mouth shut about it, too, see if he doesn't!" Again he gestured

with the automatic. "Now start takin' those mudpies apart, honey! We wasted enough time already."

"Y-yes—I—I'm going to—it—it's very dry—it'll crumble the minute I touch it."

"Okay, then, so it crumbles. So it won't take you long to go through all of 'em. Come on now, make it snappy! You act like you're in a trance. I can see I'm gonna hafta wake you up—and I know just the way, baby—" His face twisted into a salacious leer.

She untied the white cloth from the nearest ball of black clay, carefully lifted it out, raising her eyes to Raoul. Suddenly she flung the ball at Matt Harshaw. "Take it!" she cried.

He stumbled back with an oath, and instantly Raoul was on him, seizing the automatic and forcing its muzzle up towards the ceiling, while he crooked his other arm round Matt Harshaw's neck. For a moment there was a furious struggle; then the gun clattered to the floor, and Alice stooped and seized it just as Raoul Beringer sent his right fist crashing to the point of Matt Harshaw's jaw.

"I'll telephone for the gendarmes, Alice," he panted. "Keep the gun on him. I think I knocked him out, and I hope he stays that way so you won't have to shoot him. I want him to be alive so he can tell the police in your country about your uncle."

It was over. Two hours later a police car drove in from Paris and a *sous-prefect* led Matt Harshaw away in handcuffs. The attempted assault at the chateau would provide sufficient criminal charge to lodge him in jail till the American authorities could extradite him back to Illinois to stand trial for the murder of Pierre Laborde. And Otto Miller would soon be hearing from the immigration authorities, as would his wife Greta. There might even be a trial for the murder of Heinrich Müller, although Robert Beringer regretfully admitted that without wit-

nesses and the impossibility of compelling Otto Müller to testify against himself, it might come to nothing.

"What will you do now, *ma petite?*" he asked Alice. Augustine, who had recovered from her fright when Matt Harshaw had forced his way in at gunpoint at the kitchen door, was serving strong black coffee and the rest of her mouth-watering cherry tarts. In spite of doctor's orders, Raoul's father insisted on consuming one of them as well as a glass of his favorite Montrachet.

"I—I haven't even begun to think about it, Mr. Beringer. I—I suppose I'll go back to college and become a teacher. And work at my ceramics. I don't know that I want to go back to Murganville, or to that house. I—I couldn't bear to remember what Uncle Otto had done."

"At any rate," Raoul smilingly interposed, "you are here to see Paris. That is the condition of your prize, is it not?"

"Yes, that's true."

"And I promised to be your guide to the Louvre and the museums and the many other interesting places, didn't I?"

She looked at him for a long moment. Then she flushed. His sympathetic smile was contagious, and she found herself returning it.

"Yes, you did," she replied.

"A Beringer always keeps his promises, Alice. That was the first one I made you. And I promise you it won't be the last."

"Yes," the old man in the wheelchair repeated with relish, "a Beringer always keeps his promises."

Raoul came over and took her by the hand. "We had better get started," he said. "Do you know how long it takes to see Paris?"

"N-no," Alice stammered, unable to take her eyes from him.

His face became serious. "A very long time," he said.

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